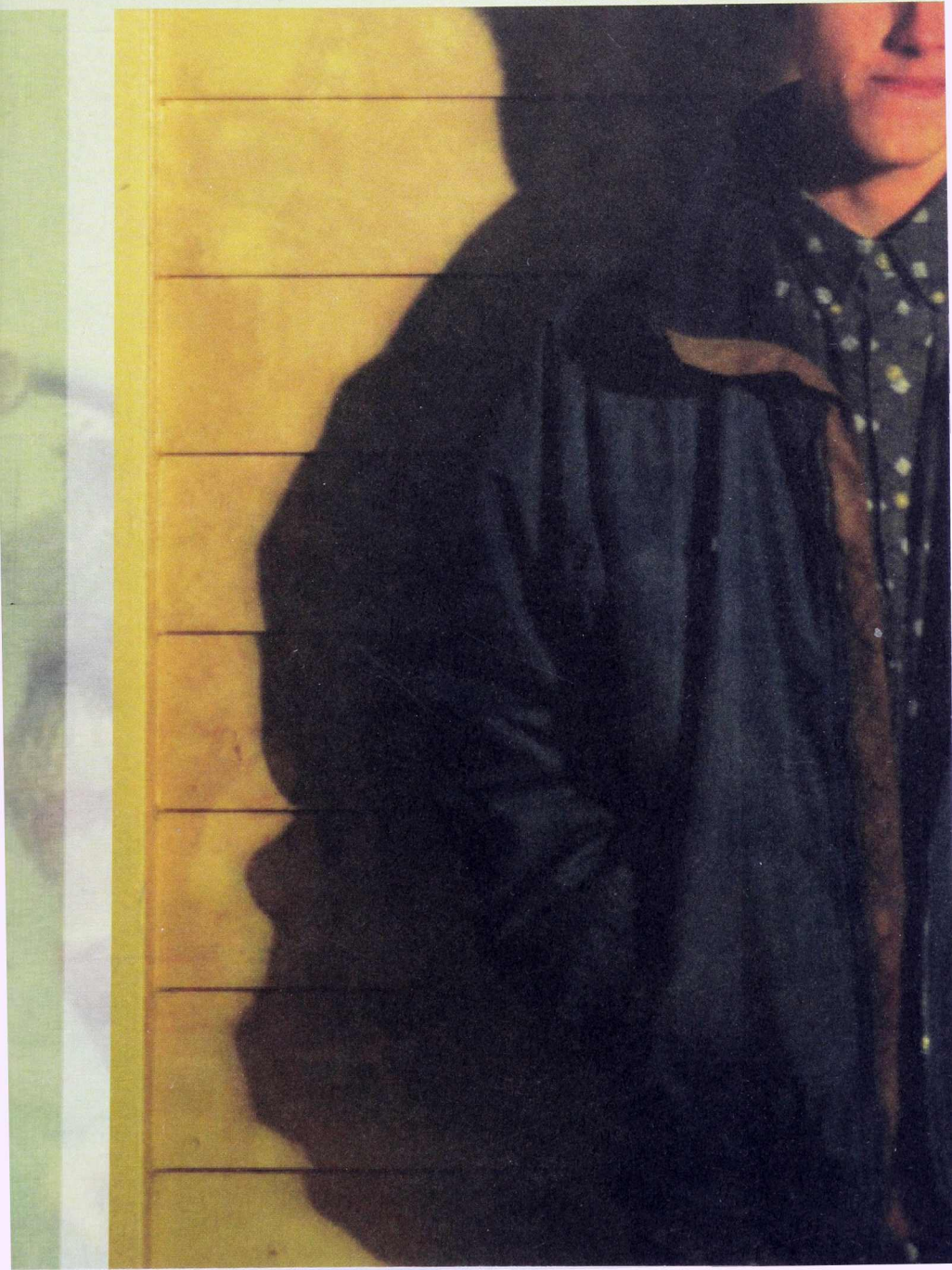


arden 2013











# arden

volume xv

2013

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# kocian award winners

prize for fiction

lito, YQR

prize for nonfiction

Marshall Callaway, *Getting to Know You*

prize for poetry

Tuesday Parker, *4:22 AM*

prize for art

Zach Tittle, *Terrarium*

## editor's note

For too long the art student has accepted abuse, allegations that we'll never make a chic living, as if such a thing ought to be our whole ambition, as if Stephen King struggles to make rent. Parents all over the country, intimidated by a sluggish economy and rising tuition rates, are corralling their young adults into business and marketing and engineering programs. While I have nothing against these programs of study, I remember looking through the immense stack of submissions our little journal received this year and wanting to send the lot to my Congressman as evidence: the arts are well and alive, well because students still flock to their practice, and alive because in their practice life is renewed and made livable.

This year's journal is a kind of all-star act and best-new act rolled into one. Inside are award winners from years past, and voices new to the *Arden* that prove beyond doubt the vitality of Columbus State University's artistic community. I read these pages over and over, and wonder how it is that art funding might be cut when the art that comprises this journal is precisely the sort of thing that can help carry a society through hard times. We find celebrants of nature and skeptics of mechanization informing each other, coming of age narratives and mature reflections offering hope in the face of despair. We find voices local and universal all singing the same great euphony – abate, all doubters and all calamities, for this journal will better convey us through a field of corpses than any accountant's ledger.

No words can express my gratitude at having been selected Editor-in-Chief, the thanks and credit owed our editorial staff, and the blessings due the variety of faculty who encouraged us along the way. Nor will I try to thank all of the students who submitted to this journal: the reward is in the reaping, and here it is, printed. Whether your work was published or not, simply by submitting you made possible the fifteenth volume of an award winning student literary journal. Be proud of this book and be proud of your vocations.

Tom Ingram  
*Editor in Chief*

# XV

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A Cadillac crawls over railroad tracks,  
old, long unused; tires crush wilted weeds.  
Chevrolets painted like Nascar; must be dope.  
Musty dope, rolled and smoked, rises above  
trivial conversation, lustful pursuit, and vulgar jokes.

Moss drooping from trees like bitches' weaves,  
dusty beer bottles from weekends long passed,  
jut necks from brown piles of leaves under brush.  
My steps crush gravel; I struggle to keep  
my new sneaks free of debris, untainted.

Outside this tan, dirt-colored stucco shack,  
cars parked on the grass; up the lonely block  
on each end, a single, orange bulb pierces  
a blue-black, starless night, casting shadows  
from those eager to enter.

Alone, I stand under a light puffing  
a Newport, sipping a Miller, watching  
another generation sip and puff,  
flirt and fuss, sing and sin their lives away.  
I fling my bottle into the darkness.

I hadn't seen him for six years and somehow I'd found myself lost in darkness on an empty back road with my seat heater on high and his window down. We were opposites, he and I. He knew exactly where we were; I pretended I did. He was a human GPS; I was an unlabeled map. It was something how six years ago we'd all but wished death on each other and now we'd drive cross-state just to see one another. But, that's what life is. It never really goes quite the way you plan; nor, does it consider the detailed life goals you made when you were twelve. Your dreams—your needs—to never leave your hometown; marry young; and find a job where you can entertain and listen to music simultaneously. Somewhere along the way, it pulls you into the ordinary, stretches you in ways you didn't want to go and confines you to places you never intended to be in.

He drove with one awkward arm sitting on the armrest of the driver's door and the other reaching between his legs, his hand stretching up to guide the bottom of the wheel. I handed him his third Red Bull and his fifth Nutter Butter.

We'd driven for hours in that emerald Accord with no real geographical destination except to return where we started and bring back hours full of fresh inside jokes and new found knowledge of each other as free souvenirs.

Sometimes I'd see him bouncing in his seat holding back laughter; but, this time he couldn't help himself. His flesh whiskers—"dimples" as he called them—flashed across his cheeks. His smile reminded me of the tan rubber bands on his braces eight years ago. "Did you see that?"

"See what?"

"That sign said 'Tyty' and 'Paulon'."

It wasn't the peculiar names on the sign that made me laugh though; it was discovering that something so random could keep him laughing for five solid miles. It wasn't something that would've been funny with anyone else—and I didn't know why.

It was rare nights like this that made me realize how real life was intended to feel: surreal. For the first time, it didn't matter that I had a deadline within 48 hours and I hadn't even begun the manuscript. It didn't matter that he was "a little tired" from driving across the state and then hopping back in the car for a mini-road trip in the middle of the night with me. It didn't even matter that out of the hundreds of CDs in my lap, he only requested the ones with today's worst choice in mainstream pop as our soundtrack—Driver's pick.

It mattered that life was not this. Only tonight was like this.

Still, it seemed like I could've met the criteria of a first-class hypocrite; but in my mind, I wasn't. He wanted me to be proud; in his eyes, because I was worried about him, I wasn't supportive. In reality, I felt proud, angry, and scared. He was going to boot camp in New Jersey in two months. As if he wasn't far enough from me in Savannah. He always wanted out of that "deplorable, toxic-waste swamp," as he often called it; I always wanted back into that place, that old-fashioned city—my hometown—with horse-drawn carriages on every square and the beach just a few miles away. Even though he said it was because he "wanted to be a part of something bigger" than himself I still believed it was his honorable excuse to be rid of the South—to go anywhere away from here.

"I might put Alaska on my list for where I want to be stationed. I mean, no one ever requests going there; they all want places like Hawaii," he'd say.

I hated talking about the "cg," as we eventually began calling it via text message. That topic was a "don't bring it up unless you want to fight" kind of topic.

Yet, everyday I'd wake up to a "185 days left" text, or I'd have to listen to him describe his exercise regimen or how his meeting with his recruiter went. All of these things seemed innocent enough to him, but when your best friend is counting down to the day when he can't talk to you or his family for two months and when he seems excited about going to a boot camp to get yelled at and whipped into shape...it sounded more like punishment and constant reminders of how soon I'd lose my only path to the stress-less, carefree person I used to be.

"You know exactly where we are, don't you?" I asked him for the fourth time.

"Yeah," he blushed, then, followed up with extensive explanations which included thorough analyses of various interstate highway connections and alternative routes—none of which I could remember.

I'd smile, and murmur, "Oh," because what do you say to things like that?

If there was one thing that got him riled up, it was attempting to teach me irrelevant geographical facts for fifteen minutes straight then getting pushy when I'd interrupt him to say "I'm too dumb to understand all that stuff." The more I didn't understand, the more he broke it down; the more I pretended to understand, the more examples and analogies he'd come up with. Geographical topics were the only topics he'd win arguments with me over, but it never came easily; ninety-nine percent of the time, I'd still disagree after he'd given up on my stubbornness.

When we were younger, he spent all his time memorizing, drawing, and obsessing over maps. Virginia and Georgia were his main focus; the former



being his birthplace and the latter being his “favorite state shape.” His binders were filled with color coded population and county maps where notes should have been. Meanwhile, when I wasn’t busy calling him a “dirty Yankee,” or telling him to “go back up north,” I spent my time memorizing the TV guide and learning the latest celebrity gossip on E! and VH1 before anyone else.

Regardless of his size, I couldn’t visualize him doing push-ups, marching, or even standing at attention with a sergeant screaming inches away from his face. Everything about his movement was awkward, clumsy, and quick. He measured in at six-foot one and I at four-foot eleven. I’d refer to him as 6’11” because there was just no possible way that gigantic body could have actually measured 6’1.” But what did I know? I was 4’11”; that automatically added half a foot to everyone taller than me. He’d ball up his face, knit his brows together, scrunch up his lips, and pretend to be offended when I commented on his height—his way of mocking how I usually reacted when people commented on my mine.

“What is he doing?” he asked, irritated and squinting through the rearview mirror.

“What?” I pushed against the seat, trying to reach high enough to see the side mirror. There was an old, baby blue truck riding our bumper. We were the only two cars on the road.

“He’s been following us like that for about ten miles now. I didn’t want to say anything because I didn’t want you to worry; but, he’s really starting to get on my nerves.”

“Maybe he’ll go around us,” I couldn’t convince my panicky face to show I believed that.

“He could’ve long gone around us. No one is blocking him or anything.”

“He’ll turn off soon...hopefully?”

He glanced back in the mirror; I tried not to look. “What if he’s a serial killer? Or what if he’s some small town undercover cop? Or what if he’s like the monster in Jeeps Creepers?”

“Calm down. I’ll get on the highway the next chance I get.”

I dared to look, but couldn’t see a driver. I imagined him as a drunken, racist Jed Clampett.

We turned off the music and continued going the posted thirty miles per hour for another forty-five minutes. His eyes were on the truck in the rearview mirror; mine were searching his face for something reassuring.

“Can you see?” I asked him.



He turned to glance at me before answering, "Yeah."

It was his eyes that often caught my attention first. There was something unique there; something beautiful, but not quite right. They were a deep mahogany with more brown than red. His black, caterpillar thick eyebrows were nearly scraping each other above the bridge of his nose. Maybe it was the way the darkness in his eyes contrasted with the yellow undertone of his skin or maybe it was that possibly imagined flicker of evil and anger....

The first time I noticed it, he had just looked up from the floor into my eyes. It was the first time I couldn't read his eyes. I asked him, and he replied, "What look? I didn't even know I did that. Now I feel freaked out, like I have a demon in me." Whenever he did it, it always took me off guard to see his ears suddenly slide up when he'd smile or to hear his tenor voice come out instead of a demonic one.

But, I could read the irritation and frustration in his squinted eyes now.

We got off the country road after two hours of playing peek-a-boo with the side mirror. We were the only people on the highway. He turned on his high beam after passing a timid doe and her offspring lingering on the shoulder. Things started feeling okay again.

It was too late by the time we saw the flashing lights zoom behind us. Anytime you get pulled over, you automatically think "was I speeding?" Then you argue with yourself the whole time the officer is walking up to your window. It's especially worse if it's your first time being pulled over and you have no idea where you are. It was my first time; even though I was in the passenger seat and had committed no crime, I tried to plan who would be my one phone call from the station.

The officer towered over us, his badge and tight stomach being the only view I had of him from the passenger seat.

"Sir," the faceless officer said. "You know you're blinding the other drivers out here?"

"Umm, no. I mean, I almost hit two deer back there so I turned on my high beam," he gulped.

He was as scared as me; it wasn't his first time.

The officer scribbled. I planned. He squirmed.

The officer slipped a small yellow piece of paper into the car. A ticket! I thought.

"Well, I'll let you off with a warning. We don't want to have any accidents simply because your lights blinded other people from seeing the road."

"Thank you," he said. "I didn't know I was blinding other drivers. I'm really

sorry.”

I stared out the passenger window into the forest, threatening myself not to be one of those troublesome, talkative passengers and trying to figure out how we’d gotten to this point.

I wondered what our thirteen-year old selves would think had they known six years later they’d become unfathomably close to whom they thought was their worst enemy. Then I wondered what I could tell my future self during those times when I was lonely and stressed and he wasn’t there to interfere...

He got angry with me whenever I told him I didn’t want to talk about the car because it was depressing. “Why can’t you just be happy that I’m doing something with my life?” he’d ask.

I wanted to scream, I don’t make a habit out of supporting masochists; most of the time I just went with silent treatment or I’d try to explain, “Why can’t you understand that I can feel more than one thing at the same time? I’m happy that you’re doing something good; but I’m sad about losing my best friend.”

How was I supposed to be excited about that? How could he ask that of me?

“Is your heart racing too?” He asked me when the police officer retreated in darkness towards the patrol car.

“Like it could explode any second.”

“Yeah, mine too,” he said as he pulled back onto the highway, dimming his lights. “I’m tired and all, but I’m just ready to get back to Savannah after that. I’m ready to be done driving.”

My mouth scrunched into my reluctant half smile-half frown; the one I pulled out when I tried to conceal embarrassment, sadness, or pressure. I thought about what it was to have him so close; to have easy access to the spontaneity that only he injected into my life. He treated me like I was human. I was allowed to mess up, allowed to be honest, allowed to relax, and allowed to feel alive. I wasn’t ready to lose this; I would never be ready for that.

“How many times do I have to tell you?” He’d shout after hours of going back and forth with me. “You won’t lose me.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Even if I wasn’t letting stubbornness get the better of me, I still couldn’t believe him. He was too late; I had started considering that maybe people weren’t meant to be as happy as we were. That’s why no one understood us; that’s why we didn’t understand us.

That was the reason I could only categorize true moments of impulsive happiness

and peace as surreal—those kinds of feelings only existed in brief moments. Life's purest form.

"You're family to me. I'm still going to come back and see Mom and Grandpa. People go off to wars all the time and come back to their loved ones. I won't even be going to war."

But I'd heard all this before; granted from different people in different situations, but it was all the same. You get close, they back away. Same old waltz, just different partners.





There it was. The inevitable question that Thomas was able to gracefully maneuver around for almost a decade. And now, on a simple Monday, not even any special day in particular, the question had finally been asked.

"What's a Mormon?" The last word floated awkwardly off of her tongue as if she had never said it before in her entire life. I stopped editing from my computer and Thomas looked up from his camera. Our classmate held up loose pages on the floor that consisted of Thomas' first round of application papers for Brigham Young University (BYU).

Thomas drew in a deep breath. He began with Joseph Smith's revelations and attempted to explain The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints. With no hesitation, he explained polygamy and how the church had dissolved the practice. He compared newer religious practices in other faiths to Mormonism. It was text book. It was perfection.

"Oh!" The girl's look morphed from horribly confused to complete understanding. The concept had clicked. "Like Tom Cruise?!"

Thomas looked at me, looked at his camera, and looked back at the girl. "Yup. Exactly like Tom Cruise."

FADE IN FROM BLACK – CAMERA A tilted downward on scraps of white unlined paper, words focus on paper

Voice Over (V.O.) Off Screen (O.S.)

My Dearest Maude:

I profusely apologize for the tremendous despair and misery that undoubtedly comes from the absence of a letter from me, but I pray that this letter may fill the void that has most certainly embedded itself deep within your heart... To answer your question from the last letter, yes, the weather has finally warmed up. We are not allowed to swim, but I have been to the beach. The sand is so clean and the water is so pure. Much MUCH better than any Florida beach. Yes, nude beaches definitely exist here. We went bike riding for an activity along the shore, and let's just say I now know exactly what an uncircumcised penis looks like and just how massive an old man's butt is. And I'll leave it at that...

FADE TO BLACK, FADE FROM BLACK to the clique montage of pictures of Thomas and me growing up together, rough cuts from our countless film projects, and finally graduating high school. TITLE SEQUENCE ends with "TO WRITE WITH LIGHT."

V.O. O.S. with clips from Jean-Pierre Jeunet's award winning film rolling consecutively

There is an amazingly ingenious technique in the film *Amélie* that has always stuck to me. The narrator will give seemingly irrelevant facts as a new character is introduced. For instance, "Raphaël Poulain doesn't like peeing next to somebody else. Raphaël Poulain likes to tear big pieces of wallpaper off the walls [and] to line up his shoes and polish them with great care."

FLASHBACK – INT. of Fort Benning's only theater CAMERA A is parallel with film projector as CAMERA B films child's reactions.

There wasn't an epiphany that I (nor Thomas, for that matter) wanted to make films. On the other hand, I can't think of what I wanted to do before filmmaking. It's completely blank. It all started as a dabbling. A couple VHS tapes for the middle school news in 8th grade did not constitute a foundation for career, as my mother reminded me (and still reminds me to this day). Throughout my childhood though, I was exposed to amazing films. *E.T.* became an after school specialty. In elementary school, I remember seeing *Titanic* in theaters twice. Not only was I confused on why I was looking at boobies with my mom, but I couldn't understand how they recreated the film if the ship sank years ago. It's the first distinct movie that, looking back, had me curious. For film, that is. Not the boobies.

DISSOLVE FROM SCENE/V.O. O.S. PEDESTAL of Thomas from feet to face

Thomas Richards loves apple sauce. He loves The Beatles, but refuses to believe they were on drugs even after watching *Across the Universe*. He doesn't like when people ask him if he plays basketball because he is 6'8" ft tall (he doesn't). Thomas Richards doesn't have sex, drink alcohol or caffeine, do drugs, curse, or (to my horror) watch R-rated movies. Thomas Richards is a hopeless romantic, ruthless karaokeer, and a devout Mormon.



MEDIUM CLOSE UP of Thomas grinning from ear to ear

FLASHBACK - INT. high school / CAMERA at waist level in crowded hallway. As the students walk by, CAMERA COUNTERS Thomas' movement toward the camera and TRACKS backward

V.O. O.S.

High school for Thomas was an ongoing joke. He barely studied and made the top ten in our class. He was an excellent soccer player, practicing thespian, and liked by all. By all 80's movie rights, he should have been one of the elite. However, when you are shaped like a pole and tower over the entire student population with a mop of frazzled, curly hair, apparently one ends up in between a cooler version of *Saved by the Bell's* Screech and less spastic Cramer from *Seinfeld*. Being from a predominately Baptist high school, not many people understood nor cared to understand Thomas' religion. Thankfully, he never was berated or belittled about being a Mormon. He was dubbed the Mormon and everyone accepted him without any questions. Never the less, there were no parties. No wild nights of Circle of Death and beer pong championships. No blunt cruises, one-night-stands, or *Saw* movies. Thomas wasn't sheltered, but if you asked him who T.I. was, he would probably say a calculator.

FLASHBACK – INT. middle school hallway

When we were in middle school, Thomas and I were inseparable. We had majority of our classes together and, when we were in different classes, we would write each other notes and fold them into origami patterns. Swans, turtles, and Chinese death stars would intricately be exchanged with a palmed high five or beneath our secret hiding place under the wooden trash can by the library. We always created pen names in case the notes were found. Thomas was Dobby for almost a year. Like any middle school, rumors started. Thomas and I were apparently dating. We both thought it was ridiculous so we told everyone we were cousins. Students, teachers, even the Vice-Principal soon believed Thomas' mother was my aunt. We were allowed to sit next to each other on field trips even though boys and girls were strictly forbidden to sit with one another. Ever since then, Thomas and I have remained friends. Nothing more, nothing less. For almost a decade, we signed up for the same broadcast classes and never once was there anything more than a friendship.

## CUT TO PRESENT DAY

"This is what it says in our handbook: 'Opposite Sex:' Never be alone with, flirt with, or associate in any other inappropriate way with anyone of the opposite sex. Do not associate with the opposite sex by text, letter, calls, or email from any woman living within or near the mission.' So, that eliminates me dating completely. You know me though. There is always a girl. I've got a little crush, but nothing is going to come of it."

FLASHBACK – CAMERA A CLOSE UP on Thomas, CAMERA B CLOSE UP on Ashley/CAMERA C WIDE SHOT to show Ashley on her tip toes trying to kiss Thomas

Kissing to Thomas was how some people view sex: it was supposed to happen in private and with someone you loved. He had a couple of girl friends here and there, but he refused to kiss them. He was waiting for the perfect girl.

Thomas had planned to get his first kiss during the end of our junior year in high school. He had patiently waited, and he was going to attempt to kiss a girl whom he had liked for months, Lauren. Lauren had just broken up with her Westpoint bound, MMA fighting boyfriend for undisclosed reasons, and Thomas asked her out the day after. He hadn't been seeing Lauren long, but he was convinced he had found his first kiss. When he ran into the broadcast room the Monday after, he rushed through the details about how she smelled like soap and tasted like watermelon.

"I think I like kissing," he said and gave his trademark grin. I nodded and stared at my screen. Splice clip. Adjust frame. Splice. Splice. Splice.

"What'd you do this weekend?" He pulled his lips to the side of his face. He knew. He always knew.

I guess it first should be said that Thomas despised the boy I was dating. He refused to talk to me if we were together. He had seen the shit I had gone through with him and thought he was filthy. In the least eloquent way possible, I attempted to explain how we had been drinking, turned on a movie, and lost my virginity. He paused, collected himself, and said, "What movie?"

"*The Hills Have Eyes*," I reluctantly replied.

"You know you can do better than that."

FLASHBACK – CAMERA A WIDE SHOT on my house as my mother storms out of the front door

My dad was diagnosed with cancer sometime between 2007 and 2008. I will never get a straight answer from him about when he found out. In fact, I wouldn't have even known if I hadn't heard a voice mail from his doctor. My household is very secretive when it comes to matters that matter. He had the cancerous spot scraped from his face, but they didn't know what was going to happen next.

My mother didn't know how to handle the situation and took her frustrations out on my sister, relentlessly berating her about her weight. If it wasn't the weight issue, it could fall into two other categories: the "fucking disgusting fucking house that no one gives two shits about" or "being a fucking little whore." Each one with the exact same disdain and verbal acidity as the next. With barely enough money to pay for my car, I would sneak out night after night with various faces from around the neighborhood to get away from my parents. Ray (one of the regulars who would pick me up) would park his father's dilapidated truck outside of my house. I would wait until my father's snoring echoed through my wall, carefully shimmy out of my window, and jump into the truck. Ray had hundreds of thousands of channels and we would sit there for hours on end watching films. B grade horror movies, Sundance nominees, documentaries about the environment. Because Thomas refused to watch R-rated films, he would live vicariously through my cinematic efforts as I recapped the details of the previous nights' films.

FADE TO V.O.

CAMERA A EXT CLOSE UPS on Thomas' house; pictures of his family on the mantel, his soccer trophy from elementary school.

It wasn't until we were seniors that Thomas told me about his family. His handful of sisters had moved out of his house and married leaving Thomas with an estranged nephew and his parents. His mother had fallen asleep at the wheel of her car years ago and smashed into a semi-truck and couldn't work. Thomas' father was a construction worker, a landscaper, and an all around handy man. However, like Thomas, Mr. Richards had a huge heart and generous hands. If someone couldn't pay him for his services, Mr. Richards would wave the fee and allow them to "pay



'em whenever they could." I first knew something was wrong when Thomas sat down at lunch rather than going through the line. He said his stomach hurt, but Thomas' stomach had been hurting two weeks in a row. His parents had declared bankruptcy and were resorting to using Thomas' college fund for everyday expenses. Unless Thomas received a mammoth scholarship, community college, let alone a top university, was out of the question. Another friend and I started taking turns bringing Thomas lunch every day. This is where I found out about the applesauce obsession.

FADE FROM BLACK

CAMERA A is out of focus as it follows me into the night

After a Saturday night's worth of drinking, I had the brilliant idea to call Thomas. I walked out to the porch by myself and lit a cigarette. Closing one eye to focus on dialing the numbers, I knew it was a bad idea before the phone even connected. But, the Soco told me otherwise.

"Hello?"

"Helloooooo." I kept repeating "Come to the part-tayyy!" and giggling a lot. Someone had come on the porch shouting about cops coming. I was obviously auditorily piss wasted.

"Damn it, Christina. Don't call me like this ever again." And he hung up. It was the first and only time I have heard Thomas curse.

CUT TO

Thomas never failed to be at church on Sunday. Or Tuesday and Thursday morning at 6 AM for his bible study before school. Or for their weekly congregation dinners. So, when he told me Mormons are supposed to go on a two year mission trip once they enter college, I wasn't surprised. With the help of a disgustingly huge scholarship, he completed his freshmen year at BYU before he was stationed in Lithuania in December of 2009.

FADE TO BLACK

PARTY SCENE ONE is not lit well. Dark cast shadows on surrounding walls and bass on the stereo is fully turned on. CAMERA A is placed on a bookcase and TIME LAPSE the entire evening.

Everyone in the apartment was crowded around a table and everyone was laughing obnoxiously loud. George Romero would have been proud to see this amount of lifelessness in a room. Clouds billowed from cigar wraps and faces slid off. Someone had brought a considerable amount of cocaine with them. The little mounds speckled the table and it wasn't long before my nose was buried in the trenches along with everyone else.

To fall from grace is a lot easier with powder underneath you.

CUT TO

Although the ending is lazy (why was the bus hauling ass in a school zone?), *Mean Girls* has one of the best scenes of all time. When Cady Heron is in the bathroom, her friend is looking through her pictures on her dresser. Obviously drunk, Heron and her friends are slumped over each other in the picture that the boy picks up. However, hiding behind the tramp photo is one of Cady as a little girl, riding an elephant. These ten seconds in pop culture film are small, but one of the scenes that are closest to my heart.

FLASHBACK with still pictures

V.O.

Freshman year of college wasn't anything like a movie. It wasn't one thing that had gone wrong, but a culmination of everything had gone sour in a matter of months. A film program had accepted me, but I couldn't leave my sister alone with my mom for more than a couple days before I received a phone call in tears. The trashy boyfriend had been sleeping with half the county behind my back including my "best friend." And there was the infamous arrest for beating the fore mentioned "best friend's" mail box in after finding out. My father was in and out of the hospital constantly, a close friend was killed in a car accident, and Thomas was preparing to leave Utah's training for Lithuania. I honestly just didn't know how to handle it.

AERIAL SHOT – CAMERA A swirls downward on the backyard to me in the fetal position. The sun is still coming up and there is a haze covering the lake that house sits on.

After an extremely intense party at a friend's house, I woke up the next morning on the dewy back yard wearing nothing but my underwear. My thighs were covered in blood, but I wasn't cut anywhere. And I couldn't remember a fucking thing. At all. No one knew what happened other than I had walked off with some guy.

I drove to the hospital with glazed eyes and used my tongue to pull the grime off of my teeth like the glue on a new credit card. My car seat was saturated with blood by the time I pulled into the ER parking lot. When I was called to the back, the nurse didn't show much sympathy. I guess it's hard to show pity to someone wearing kitten heels and covered in mud. She just kept saying "abrasions" and stressing the importance of having safe sex. She gave me a card if I "felt the need that I ever needed to talk to someone." The line was always busy.

FLASHBACK with words "ONEYEAR AGO" DISSOLVING into scene

The week before Thomas left for Lithuania, he came back from BYU to say good bye to his family and friends. It was almost midnight when Thomas pulled into the gravel driveway. We decided that we wanted to make it fast and painful, rather than drag out the inevitable. He gave me a hug and told me I had two years to clean up my act. There weren't ultimatums set, but he said he was going to Hollywood with or without me when he came back. With mascara bleeding out of my eyes and my nose running all over my face, Thomas kissed me through my tears and got in his car and left.

SLOW FADE FROM BLACK to V.O.

M. Night Shyamalan wrote *Lady in the Water* for his children. It was his masterpiece that he wanted to present to the world to change his name in cinema and possibly gain favorability back with the Disney Corporation who fired him after *The Village*. Shyamalan hired the best of the best, including his cinematographer, Chris Doyle. Although there is no direct tie to *Lady in the Water's* faint splash that it made in theaters to Doyle, many believe (including countless people that worked on set),



that Doyle's drunken belligerence delayed shoots and wrecked shots due to his stumbling and impaired vision. Shyamalan's career has not made a comeback since.

WIPE DOWN TO V.O. O.S.

CAMERA A is positioned in door frame as door opens to reveal THOMAS in his customary mission issued suit and tie

CAMERA B show me tapping away on a laptop in class

Thomas' letters used to come once a month. I would come home from work and find a small white envelope from an Elder Thomas Richards. No matter what, I always cry. I carefully tear the seal back to reveal the letter and digest every single syllable. Every month it became a little easier to turn down a bump. I would come home from a party completely sober and write Thomas epic novels about things we could film once he came home. Storyboards, clippings from magazines, Oscar nominee sheets. I took a film class at my college and would write Thomas about techniques we had been mispronouncing ("mez-uhn-scen") or movie trivia we had missed. Then, in May, there wasn't a letter. I wrote to him asking him if he was okay. Maybe his mission was becoming more hectic and he didn't have time that month. I explained my brilliant idea to turn our story into a movie. A small line of x's and o's delicately were hung under "I miss you a lot." There was no response in June. "Thomas, I was wondering if everything is alright." July, August. Nothing. I had given up. And, with the absence of Thomas, I subconsciously decided to crawl back to old habits. One evening in late August, I found myself snorting myself practically sane. My forehead was attached to the counter top of a friend's kitchen. It was okay though. A couple of lines were okay. Everything was going to be okay after one more. Maybe another. Hours later, everyone was leaving the party, so I reluctantly drove home with a headache. Stumbling into the front door of my house, I went to grab a beer from the fridge. No cans were left. Fuck. I fumbled around in the drawers looking for a beer bottle opener. Nothing. I went to my room with my unopened beer and noticed a small white letter on my bed my father had undoubtedly delivered. There was familiar handwriting from an Elder Thomas Richards.

CUT TO PRESENT DAY: Back to original letter from opening

...that's awesome that you met someone who is into film too! Don't let him take my position :) I'm glad you are keeping the tradition strong and I can't wait to see the awesome things you guys produce while I'm gone! I think that our letters would be a great screenplay..start writing it for when I come home! As for what the future holds for us...only we can decide that. I'd say really think about your decisions before you act on them. I know that He is real. He is our Father and will love us no matter what we do (or what we may have done) and keep loving us. Thank you so much for you love and prayers, Christina. Good luck with your sobriety and I look forward to your next letter.

Love,

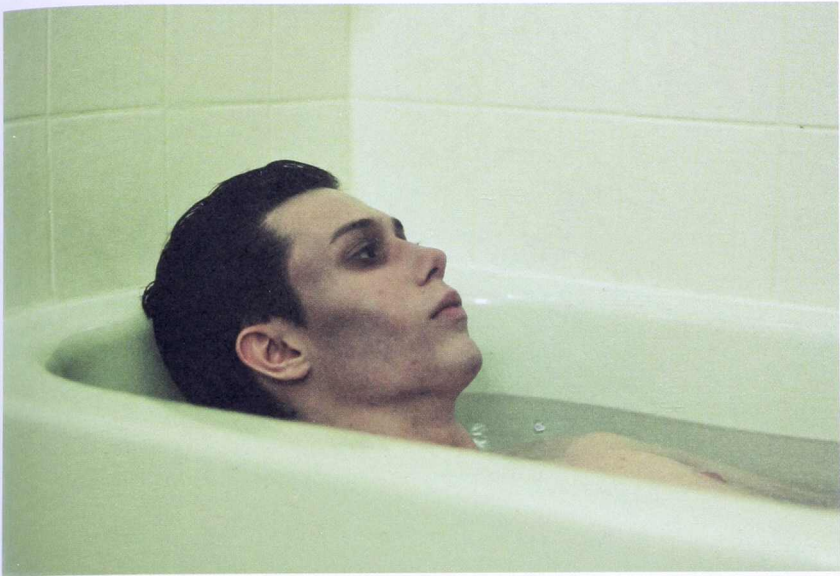
Harold (Thomas)"

CUT TO V.O. O.S.

CAMERA A shows the letters and pictures Thomas has included in his letters Talking Heads – "Once in a Lifetime" fades in

Text FADES in on screen:

Thomas will be back in the United States during December of 2012. He will have been totally detached from the western world for almost two years. He has said he will continue not to drink or smoke, but he does require lots of filming time and maybe an occasional R-rated film or two. I don't think I could ask for anything else either.





The ceilings are quiet.  
Every movement delivers a telling creak,  
but these walls will not groan for hours.  
The floors do not rattle with chatter.  
The static buzz of late night commercials has faded.  
Music's abandoned the night.

The still slats of slanted streetlight  
slide down from the ceiling.  
Staring silently  
I study the shadow in the crease of the wall,  
searching for the line that defines the corner.

I hear the rumble first.  
Distant. Distinct.  
The growl of the engine builds as it mounts the small rise  
to huff noisily in front of the sleepy windows.  
I hear the scrape of steel on steel  
and weight groan.  
Empty beer bottles, rotted food,  
heaps of straining trash bags  
rattle and crash against the gluttonous gorge.  
The night echoes a hollow scrape and thwack of plastic lids  
as the bin is returned from flight;  
empty, gaping.  
Beetle-like arms clang in rest above the wide black blank eyes  
and the beast lumbers away,  
venturing off to seek the refuse of the night.

First time it's been late all week.



"We open to music, something rowdy, bright, fun. First shots are choppy, quick cuts, action. But the camera has a filter on it so everything is dull like reality at first.

"Daytime. Interior. An alarm clock sounds to the soundtrack's beat. Then cut to another bedroom, another alarm clock, also to the beat. The camera never stops moving. Back to the first room, and Buck's arm slams it off, but the music continues. He goes back to sleep.

"In the other room, Allie's arm slams her alarm. She gets up and out of bed, but we don't see her face yet.

"Then, Buck pops up from the covers. Buck's a skinny, awkward seventeen year old in boxers. He looks hungover, red eyes, tired: *Fuck! I'm late!*

"Allie's already dressed in black and out the door. Maybe she's got thick eyeliner, black hair covering her face, a coat, a shoulder bag. She's also seventeen, also awkwardly attractive. She's not rushed leaving her small bungalow, stepping out onto a busy Toronto street. Snow on the ground. Dull sunshine, so she puts on her sunglasses.

"Buck's in front of his bathroom mirror coming up from splashing his face. He stares in horror: *Fuck! A zit!*

"Allie's rooting around her bag, grabs a pack of Belmont Milds: *Fuck! Empty!*

"In his kitchen, Buck irons his school uniform: shirt, pants, blazer, tie — everything perfect. He attempts to make a proper breakfast like eggs, fruit, bagels, but his toaster-oven fritzes and sparks. *Fuck!*

"From off-camera: *What's that, Buck?*

"No time to talk: *Nothing mom, don't worry.*

"The camera moves to the living room, but we don't see Mom's face. It's clear she's been on the couch all night, maybe all year. Buck walks past the shot: *See you later.*

"The camera pulls to the TV, a scene from *Ellen*, the sitcom, where she's talking about toaster-ovens, how if gays convert enough straights, we get a free toaster oven. The music builds.

"Allie approaches a group of seniors walking to their high school, also in uniform. She speaks to the main guy, Jack. He's also seventeen, his tie loosened, obvious jock.

"Walking towards Jack, she asks: *Hey, can I bum a cigarette? I'm all out.* She suddenly trips on ice and falls on her back. Jack's group starts laughing. He whispers something to them.

"Buck runs to the subway turnstile, but it stops. He tries to swipe his card — no luck, it's out. He drops a toonie in the box and says to the ticket agent: *My last dime, dude*. The agent smirks. Buck's through the turnstile.

"Jack walks over to Allie and offers his hand, just as she's almost up, he lets go, she falls again. The group laughs. Jack joins them, laughing, they turn and walk off: *Smoking's bad for you*.

"Allie is pissed, her coat torn, greyed with slush: *Fuckers*.

"Buck rushes out through the closing subway doors, but the camera holds on his blazer: left on the train.

"Allie gets up. She's been in front of their high school. Students whisper, talk about her, point. She walks up to a group of kids and before he has a chance to light it, she grabs a cigarette out of a minor-niner's hand.

"Allie zombies into the crowded hallways, enters the boys' bathroom, slams a stall shut, squats on a toilet, and lights a cigarette.

"Buck also enters. The door slams. Music stops. Bell rings.

"Allie exhales in the stall.

"Buck takes a beat to fix his shirt and tie.

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"After a second, Jack walks into the bathroom and over to a urinal. We cut between this and Allie eavesdropping and smoking quietly in the stall.

"Jack turns to Buck: *You just looking at me?* Buck just stares at him, doesn't want to start. *I'm talking to you, loser*.

"Buck, reluctantly: *Do we really have to go through this every day?*

"This just pisses Jack off. *I tell you you could speak?* He goes over, grabs Buck's shirt.

"*Leave me alone, Jack*.

"He slaps Buck: *Can't you just shut the fuck up?*

"Buck exhales heavy, Allie too.

"Jack pushes Buck down. *It's a dollar every time you speak. Hand it over*. Buck's on his back. *Now!*

"Buck hands him his wallet. Jack checks it: *Empty, huh?* He steps on Buck's chin. *At least I can use your MetroCard*. He puts the wallet in his back pocket. *Get some bills next time, faggot*.

"Jack exits. Buck gets up and tries to fix his clothes. They're dirty, he's red-faced.

"Allie leaves the stall, and undressing: *He's such a dick. Why you let him do that?*

"Buck is unfazed she's in the boys' room: *I have a choice?*

"Allie's changing into her uniform: *You should kick him in those pretty white teeth.*

"*Why didn't I think of that?* Buck stays in the mirror.

"She's seen him around: *I'm Allie. You're Buck, right?* He nods. *You're a mess, kid.*

"He rolls his eyes at her and turns to leave: *Thanks, Allie. I feel so much better.*

"Buck goes to class, but the teacher kicks him out for his messy uniform—it's unacceptable. He turns to the hall to witness Allie's shoulder bag knocked off by some asshole. Its contents scatter, a tequila bottle smashes. Allie's over it: *Fuck it.*

"Together, Buck and Allie walk outside. *I don't think this day is supposed to happen, Buck. I need a smoke.*

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"They walk over to Allie's house. Better to play hooky than keep hurting. They talk about school. They loosen their ties. They come out to each other.

"*No way, Allie! I can't believe you're a muff-bean!!*

"Allie doesn't laugh: *Wish I could say the same about you, Buck.*

"They joke around, connect. The camera's still reality-grey.

"When they get to Allie's house, her dad is leaving: *Sorry hon, you're on your own for dinner. I've got an open house again.* He meets Buck, then leaves.

"*Pizza bagel?* Her toaster oven also fritzes, sparks. *I guess it's delivery tonight.*

"Allie tells Buck about Jack pushing her, they commiserate. Allie insists: *We should do something, but what?* They think on it.

"They have a cocktail. *Who cares if it's the morning!* They drink, they smoke, they laugh. Then, Buck's got it.

"*I got it! I have a plan!*

"Music Montage 1 — something obnoxious, singable:

"They get silly, dress up in costumes, look at pictures, cut things out of magazines, and work at Allie's computer. They lip synch. It's all MTV, over-the-top, teenage pop ridiculousness with titles: FUN! And GIRLFRIEND! And IT'S ALL GOOD! It's playful, charming. The camera's still dull, and the montage takes us into night. The two fall on each other laughing. The music stops abruptly.

"Allie judges the finished product, we don't see it yet: *It's perfect! He'll love it!* Then, we see it:

"Photoshopped images of Jack in several gay porn scenes. Hold shot to:

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"The next morning at school, Jack tears their poster off the wall. *I'm gonna fucking kill them.*

"The school is littered with posters of him in various scenes. Teachers horrified. Students laughing. People collect and share the posters.

"Jack's with his group of friends: *We have to find out what maniac did this. I'll rip his fucking head off.*

"Suppressing his laughter, one friend notices something on the back of the poster: it's Allie's father, his real estate listing, his headshot. *Doesn't this guy work with your dad?*

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"Enter Buck and Allie. Everyone applauds, but it's bad timing. Jack and friends are ready to throw down. Amidst joy and dread, our two heroes escape, running through the Toronto streets around school. Titles: RUN! and RUN! and RUN! Jack's friends give up the chase after a couple of blocks, but Jack doesn't back down: *Get back here! Cowards!! I'm gonna beat the shit outta your queer asses!!!*

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"They get on the back of a truck, narrowly escaping Jack. *That was so close, Allie, what are we gonna do?*

"She catches her breath: *I dunno. But I don't wanna stop, Buck. Let's just keep going.*

"He's puzzled, not sure what she means. *Well, I guess what I mean is that we should just give 'em what they want. I'm sick of this act, trying to be like them. We're not. You in?*

"She reaches out her hand, he takes it, closeup on their grip, Thelma & Louise.

"Back at Allie's, Music Montage 2—something loud, gay, you gotta dance:

"They cut up their school uniforms, put on makeup, do their hair. Titles: OOO LA LA! Allie pulls out a couple super soakers. Buck resists: *Allie, we can't. It's forbidden. It's too soon.* Titles: WATCH OUT! We see what they're working on; it's a little funk diva, drag queen, and anime. Buck pulls some costumes onscreen for Allie's approval. Titles: DANGER! Allie dons a lab-coat and mixes up some lethal chemicals in bubbling, smoking beakers. Titles: YOUNG. Buck tries on a mask. Titles: QUEER. Buck looks at Allie: *You've done it!* Titles: REBELS. Music cuts.

"The finished product: Buck and Allie pose in future-queer costumes. We see their campy guns outfitted like rainbow super soakers. Full color lens. *Let the spree begin!*

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"At first, the YQRs step out onto the Toronto streets and just walk around. *Let's do some shopping.* They go to a few boutiques, and no one really reacts. They select a couple of choice items: some shoes, cool Ts, a book by Foucault. They make their way to the gayborhood at Church & Wellesley. They order lunch at Express Pizza, but the clerk is a jerk. They smile at each other and ZAP: the cashier falls down dead. Closeup on the trail of rainbow-colored blood at his mouth. Buck takes a polaroid of the body.

"Again, they get attitude trying to rent a video at Video24/7. The clerk gets it, ZAP! and we see his rainbow blood. Polaroid flash.

"Another bitch gets it at the BodyShop when she won't tell Buck what's in the glycerine soap: ZAP, rainbow blood, polaroid.

"YQRs walk past the Second Cup steps. The throng of lesbian and gay loiterers whistle and give them cat calls. *That's not very nice.* ZAP. But they don't die, they're just suddenly a lot nicer, proper, and apologetic.

"So we get a couple scenes of the YQRs about town, directing traffic, righting petty wrongs, rudeness. Someone invites them to a party later. *Sounds good. We'll be there.*

"They go to Allie's father's office building, but he's not there. His secretary gives them attitude: ZAP, rainbow, click.

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"In the elevator, on the way down, Allie suggests beer for the party. Buck still isn't used to his superpowers: *But we're underage.*

"Enter Mr. Suit, a real estate executive in his mid-40s. Square jaw, slick hair, attaché. Think: Patrick Bateman. He gives the YQRs a nasty look. Allie is unimpressed: *Take a picture — it lasts longer.* Buck adds: *Zap him, Allie.*

"She holds her gun to his throat: *This one's special. I hate fucking suits.*

"Mr. Suit drops his briefcase: *Please, don't hurt me. I got a wife and kids. Take anything you want.*

"Buck laughs: *That was fast. Zap him. I wanna make it to the party.* He pulls the elevator stop.

"Allie thinks about it for a second: *Not yet. Does that phone work here in the elevator, mister?* Mr. Suit flips open the phone and hands it to her. *No, I want you to call your kids. Tell them how much you miss them. Tell them that you're sorry. Do it!*

"Mr. Suit shakes and then dials: *But what am I sorry for?* We can hear someone pick up. It's his son: *Hello? Hello?* Allie smiles: *Tell him you're sorry for being such a shit dad.*

Mr. Suit sweats, nervous: *Son? Jack? Are you there?*

"Allie looks at Buck in disbelief, whispers to him: *No way? Can't be...*

"We cut to Jack at home, chilling with a friend, he wanders into the other room with the phone: *Dad, are you okay?*

"Back in the elevator: *Son, I'm sorry for everything. For being such a shitty dad.* The YQRs smile and nod at each other. Allie holds the gun closer to Mr. Suit's throat.

"Back with Jack: *Dad, you're scaring me. Is everything okay?* We hear dad's voice on Jack's end: *Son, I'm sorry that your mom and I made you gay. It's okay that you are. We love you anyway. There's no need to pretend anymore.* Jack is shocked, but he doesn't really try to defend himself. *Dad, what is going on?*

"Back in the elevator: *It's okay. You don't have to come out. We already know. Just accept it, son.* Mr. Suit hangs up. YQRs smile, high-five. *What kind of monsters are you?*

"Buck holds his gun out: *Your friendly neighborhood queers. ZAP.* Cut to:

"Exterior of the LCBO. Then, interior.

"The YQRs talk to the cashier: *Ma'am, do I look underage?* Long pause. Cut to:

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"Interior, night. Slamming house party in a large loft downtown. Lots of people, different shapes, different colors, different states of undress. Loud music. The YQRs fit right in, and dance. They start to talk to a very pretty boy of Buck's dreams (B.O.D.) and his friend, a very pretty girl of Allie's dreams (G.O.D.). They talk and dance for a bit. BOD leads Buck to a bedroom. GOD leads Allie to a bedroom across the hall.

"There's soft music playing in the quiet, candlelit bedroom. BOD leads Buck to the bed and they make eyes at each other. *I'm so glad I met you tonight, Buck. It's really rare that you meet such a perfect guy in a place like this. Want some ecstasy?*

"In Allie's room, a similar scene. *Allie, I like that name. Short for anything? No? Well, it's really pretty. So, like, what do you do? No way: I'm in high school, too.*

"Buck suspects BOD's a flake: *Maybe we should just keep dancing.* BOD doesn't like this idea: *But we just met. We should just keep bonding like this. I can really see us living together... forever... having kids, a house, the whole thing.* Buck, horrified.

"GOD isn't the brightest: *So are you really thinking about college? I was hoping that my modeling career would really, like, take off, you know. Like, usually lesbians don't look all girly like me, and everyone thinks I'm hot. I think the camera can see things like that, don't you? Don't you love the taste of my lip gloss.* Allie, horrified.

"Buck wants to give him the benefit of the doubt: *Look dude, obviously you have*





really good taste, but I don't want to get into anything serious right now. BOD feels him pulling away: *But baby, we don't have to get serious. Here, try some. It makes you feel things.*

"GOD: *I told the woman: 'See, these wallets don't float.' And I threw it up into the air and it fell right back down into my hand. I mean, how dumb do they think I am?*

"Buck is done: ZAP.

"Allie, too: ZAP.

"They meet in the hallway. *This party sucks.* Cut to:

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"Night time. Exterior. Playground. The YQRs have removed parts of their costumes for comfort, drinking beer. Allie is aloof, rocking on a swing: *Well the day wasn't a total bust. I mean, we got beer... And these polaroids!* Buck laughs. They chat.

"Buck says: *I just don't want to have to kill people to have fun everyday. Allie is sure: It'll change, don't worry.*

"Jack suddenly appears from the dark: *Not you two.*

"YQRs ready their guns, brace for trouble.

"Jack notices the outfits: *Are you wearing leotard?*

"Buck moves in: *Back up, Jack. Or it's over.*

"Jack walks closer: *What are you gonna do, drown me? I'm the one who should be shooting. You've fucked up my life. The teachers thought we put up those posters. Worst fucking day ever.*

"Allie's pitiless: *So what? You deserve it.*

"Jack takes the swing next to Allie's: *Really? I just came out to my mom and dad. I could throw up right now. They didn't deserve to know till I was ready.*

"Buck lets his weapon down. Allie is still suspicious: *If you came here looking for sympathy, Jack, you're in the wrong place. Besides, you're not even gay.*

"Jack starts to swing, laughs: *I came here to get away for awhile. Can't you just leave me alone?*

"Buck walks to Jack, stands in front of the swing so Jack stops. *Please, just leave me alone.* Buck looks him in the eyes. Buck kisses him.

"Jack in shock. Allie laughs. Music starts and Buck takes Jack's hand, pulls him out of the swing: *I've killed a lot of people today. You probably shouldn't get involved.*

"They laugh together, like the end of a kids' show. Music continues through crossfade:

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"A dark alley in full color. The camera pans, sweeps past some trash, some graffiti. There's a counter with curtains. All very mysterious. In dark robes with covered faces, Allie and Buck walk up to the counter. They put the polaroids down on the counter and pull a silk cord that rings a bell. A faceless clerk comes out and looks at the polaroids. We see the dead bodies, only we realize that they're not dead after all, they're smiling in the polaroids: bright, happy and very gay. The clerk pulls out two large boxes. *Our toaster ovens! Hooray!*

"And then, a choreographed Bollywood breakdown starts. First, Jack comes out to dance with the YQRs and the clerk. Then the newly fabulous ZAP victims come out party garb. Titles: YQR!

"We fade to rainbow as everyone enjoys the Bollywood dance party."

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"Cute. I like it," I said as everyone laughed and clapped for Claire and her young queer rebels. Claire bowed, I think.

"Thank you, guys. I hope it's funny. I think we'll be finished the script next month."

"I don't really get enough of Allie's character, I mean, what does she want?"

"Doug, this isn't a workshop," Amy explained, "Claire's just telling the story to pass the time." She passed me another log for the fire. The mountains were black again, faded into the Georgia night.

I felt everyone pull out of the story.

Helen walked into the bus to try the radio again. I could hear her fussing.

"There's something that isn't sitting right with me."

"What's that, Jake?"

"Well, the whole movie seems based on a joke from a sitcom that aired in 1997.

No one's gonna get that."

"Well, I mean that's why we included the clip in the opening scenes."

"Still. I think that's just silly. It's silly to make light of the whole thing. People get tired of gay," Jake kept it up. He was like that.

"I'm not making light," Claire got defensive. "I just think we can have smart fun for a change."

"It's silly, though. No one will care if you don't make it about the characters. If they're just gay, then it's silly."

"Maybe."



My father rushes inside, hands full.  
He opens his fists. Two dulled,  
green apples lie in his calloused palms.

I know they are from the apple tree  
next to the house. Seven years since it's  
been planted and now it decides  
it wants to bear fruit. I would have been  
more comfortable if they were store bought.

My father cuts both apples into halves.  
He and my mother split one, and my brother  
and I take the remaining pieces. My parents  
eat the fruit without hesitation but my brother  
and I are quiet.

Moments ago we were playing Call of Duty,  
going on a zombie killing spree, no mercy  
to the undead dogs, shooting at one another  
without haste. But my father has just  
asked us to eat from the tree he planted after my  
grandmother's death and I would pick the  
zombie apocalypse over this.

We both slowly take a bite out of our halves of  
the apple. It's soft and the thin skin isn't ready.  
It's sweet, and somewhat mushy. I can't finish it.

After awhile I go outside to take my dog for a walk.  
Stella wants to sniff the apple tree. I let her and search  
for more apples among the branches, but the tree is empty,  
my father harvested the only two.

Today I finally let go  
A memory, out with the trash  
A two year old chocolate flower,  
The last surviving valentine  
Wrapped in red, rose shaped.  
I found it buried on my closet floor.

A Blaze of Glory blooms outside.  
It climbs the fence and settles in,  
Firmly rooted and quite secure,  
Perennial, a faithful bud.  
And it will bloom at my back door  
With every coming spring.

fair trade.

Turner Blackburn



She wanted to be ballerina when she was little. Strong legs and straight lines, she shone on stage as her toes twinkled in pale pink laces. She danced in her room. She twirled on pointed toes in the street. She leapt through the playground with a grace unparalleled by others awkwardly fumbling their way through the shuffle of elementary school trying to ward off the beginning stench of puberty. She had a love affair with Tchaikovsky. She was beautiful. She was a star.

Her family moved when she was thirteen. The rolling hills and fields of cotton, while beautiful, had robbed her of her dream. The small town had no dance studio. The closest stage was two hours away and too far for her to shine. She crumbled without the weightlessness of the spotlight and found herself with her knees curled under her and a quiet new love in literature.

A decade drug by and brought with it a high school sweetheart turned husband, a bundle of drool and giggles, and the weight of motherhood. She's lost her line. Her slender legs carry diaper bags and groceries. The dream died in the rural south and she carved out a new happiness for herself. She'll never shine on stage again.

And yet she still knows every note of Swan Lake and sometimes, when she forgets the world is watching, she points her toes.

i imagine the flowers are old,  
if there are any at all.

the gravestone is probably small,  
a simple marker in a big plot.

my dad couldn't afford much anyway  
and your other sons and daughters  
needed their money for flat screen tvs  
and in-and-out burgers

they all wore red to the funeral  
except for tio chavo, who couldn't go.  
he was stuck in a cell he'd always  
put himself in because you couldn't  
bail him out anymore.

it is probable that when lupe died  
they put her near you, or somewhere  
near lupe's baby boy that was stillborn.

the ground is fertile with escobars,  
their continued cases of cancer.  
escobars, who are romantic and weak  
but the cancer takes away any of the beauty.

in the graveyard i imagine  
the flowers are old  
if there are any at all.  
grandpa's hair is as grey  
as your tombstone.

and its not fair that when you die  
you don't get to know that your  
rock, your "place" in the world



is going to deteriorate and that you'll  
never see marlene get married or  
meet your great grandchildren. Or  
know that gabe is joining the marines,  
how bell is struggling in germany,  
and that i didn't graduate in may  
like i was supposed to.

and you can't know that i get sick  
after meals I cook myself, how spanish  
is still hard to speak, and I just want  
to run marathons inside myself.

in the graveyard:  
i imagine the flowers are old  
if there are any at all.  
the gravestone is probably small,  
a simple marker in a big plot.  
i'm sorry I haven't come to see you yet.



My grandmother sat on the porch in her rocking chair, looking more asleep than awake with her thin, crinkled eyelids sagging into her bottom lashes. It was chilly that night. As usual, Grandmother was swaddled in three or four blankets while I used Mother's arms to shield my five-year-old self from the cool North Carolina night air. Mother sat out in the yard with me folded into her lap, plucking strands of grass. I leaned my head against her long, warm neck, feeling her throat vibrate while she and Grandmother hummed. As their chant grew softer, my restlessness faded away.

Mother began whispering a story passed down to her when she was five. She told me stars were angels. "Anidawehi," she translated. She said they'd follow me, guide me through life's darkest nights, and when the clouds, lights, and sunshine became too blinding for my weak eyes to see, I had to have faith to believe they were still there.

Even though I had never heard this story, I had heard Grandmother tell me something similar to the angels Mother was describing. I thought she called them *yunwi tsunsi*. "Like the little people, Unitsi?" I asked Mother.

"Precisely," she answered. "Except if you anger or upset *yunwi tsunsi*, their evil side will surface. You must always be cautious of that, *Ayoli*. Have faith and you'll always be protected."

"Don't forget to tell her about the *synoyi ehi nydo*, Winona," Grandma chimed.

"Ah, yes, the moon," Mother said. "Sometimes when your faith is too weak and the lights are too dark, you have to rely on the moon. In those times, all of the angels combine together to form a full moon. Sometimes the clouds seem to overtake the moon, but they can never permanently block the light."

I squirmed farther into my mother's arms as she pointed to the glowing sphere surrounded by the angelic creatures, and the clouds backing away like cowards from the angels and the sphere. The only sounds were my mother's heart beating against my ear and Grandmother rocking away. When I turned five, Grandmother said that she passed her sight onto me and that's why I had to be her eyes. That night, I started to see and feel things far beyond what I was expected. That, too, was a family trait, or so I've heard since then.

In our tribe, once one had fully grasped their faith they didn't need to look for the stars or the moon because they already believed in their existence, even on the cloudiest of nights, on the lightest of days. Those who had become experts didn't see what the rest of us saw. They just knew. That night Mother was halfway

there, balancing between unstable and unwavering faith. She could almost see what Grandmother saw. Almost.

"Ayoli," my grandmother called out to me in Cherokee, "Take me inside."

"Yes, Ulisi."

Grandmother didn't like to be approached in silence; she said it sent her bad vibes. I had wondered if it was really because it frightened her or if she thought it was rude. I placed my small hand into Grandmother's extended, cold palm. She shifted her weight from the chair onto my shoulder. Her long black and silver hair waved down her arched back to her hips and spread to cover her short, round body as she stood. I led her inside our small house, holding her hand while she felt along the walls, fingering Grandpa's prize hides to get her bearings. We stopped at the third deerskin—the one most worn away by Grandmother's fingerprints.

"We're here, Ulisi," I said, settling her in her favorite chair and re-wrapping her in blankets before going back outside to my mother.

I'd started mindlessly fidgeting with the grass again. Mother combed through my hair with her fingers occasionally slipping in deep enough to gently message my scalp. I tilted my head in her lap to see her face. She smiled. The height of her cheekbones under the moon's silvery light cast a shadow on her skin's red undertone. Her hair was a cascading stream of blackness flowing past her shoulders. As I looked up, it seemed like the stars were dancing around her in the distant sky. No matter how much I tried to hide from it, the sleeping winds finally crept around me. The winds came for me as if I was its prey, and it, my hunter. I closed my eyes.

I'd barely drowned in unconsciousness when it happened. Mother's body tensed instinctively as mine did. I also heard it: a coyote. Mother tried to hide the fear that now echoed from my eyes. Coyotes weren't good omens around here. They were normally warnings to be cautious, wary, and suspicious; but the last few times someone in our village had spotted a coyote, one of our members disappeared. Since then, we all agreed to alert each other of any signs of coyotes. Mother's face had exchanged its warmth for a look of poorly subdued panic. Within seconds, we were inside our house. Mother and Grandmother hurriedly discussed what should be done.

"I will go," Mother told her bravely, but her voice didn't match her troubled face.

I tugged on her hand, silently pleading with her.

"Ayoli," Grandmother called out from her chair.



My jaw trembled; I managed a nearly inaudible, "Y-y-yes?"

She turned her leathery face towards the sound of my voice then spoke, "Anagisdi gvdodi nasgi ageyv."

She'd said go with her. I didn't understand.

She explained that she wouldn't be able to keep pace with us and that Mother couldn't go by herself. And that I had to have faith and use her eyes now.

I cried against my mother's arms as we left Grandmother.

"May the stars guide you," Grandmother added in a strange voice. She didn't sound afraid; but, I couldn't see why.

Mother and I made our way to the village, stopping every now and then to judge the coyote's whereabouts in relation to its howling. It was at the edge of the village. By now, the clouds had covered the moon and I could barely see. I squeezed my mother's hand for reassurance and prayed to the stars to keep us safe. I thought of Mother's story; remembering that my faith and the angels would be enough protection for the both of us. I caught Mother's eyes as they returned from glancing at the stars, she must have been praying as well. I stumbled often as we ran. Each time I tripped over tree roots, my grip on Mother's palm loosened until I was empty handed.

Frantically, I searched for her grasp but I only found my fingers intertwined with chilled air. "Unitsi?" My body ached with adrenaline as I listened for Mother to answer. "Unitsi?" The only answer was Mother Nature blowing in my ear, followed by distant howling. I was never allowed to be alone in the woods, especially at night. Somehow, my tears found the moisture to replenish themselves as they made their way from my eyes to my inherited cheekbones to the ground, where the dirt greedily sucked them away.

*Pray.* A voice chimed against the wind. I obeyed. The voice sounded familiar but I couldn't tell who it belonged to over the sharp sounds of my heartbeat pounding through my body.

*Believe.* I couldn't understand what it was I was supposed to believe in; but I remembered Mother promised I would always be protected if I had faith. I believed that.

*Look.* I looked upwards. I could see through the treetops again. There were thousands of small, bluish specks of twinkling light falling from the sky. As they drifted closer to the ground, I saw small faces, arms, legs. Undoubtedly, these were the creatures Grandmother told me about—except they had wings like angels.

One hovered a few inches from my eyes; she was the one who had spoken to me, I recognized her voice as she instructed me to run.

Hundreds of the angelic little people came together, forming a moving ball of light. I followed, trusting that they'd lead me to safety and protect my mother as well. I reached out to touch my guides, but the wind from my finger's movement pushed the dainty ball forward. I ran faster. Again, I heard howling, but now it was closer.

I saw a faint hint of rusty-red belonging to the longhouse where the council stayed. At first, I didn't notice the angel people's light dimming, but soon, small groups of the winged figures gradually turned into glittering specks floating back towards the sky. I kept running until the only light left was the sight of the fire outside the longhouse. I sprinted past one of the watchmen and darted inside. I searched the alarmed faces, none belonging to my mother. I had all of their attention yet only Adohi, one of the members, approached me. His brother was the first member who had gone missing, and since then, Adohi spent most of his time in the forest searching for him.

I tried to speak but my lungs failed me. All I could force were broken phrases. "Wayaha," I whispered, "The edge of the forest."

Adohi turned to the chief.

"Wayaha, on the edge of the forest," I repeated.

The chief nodded once to Adohi then called for some of the councilmen to signal the warning to the village. Once more, the stares returned to me.

I imagined the messengers swiftly giving out warnings while searching for coyotes throughout the forest. Then my thoughts shifted to my mother. I panicked, and my eyes filled again. What if she was the next one to disappear? "Have you seen my mother?" I asked.

For the first time since I arrived at the council, the chief walked up to me, squatting to my eyelevel. He stretched out his muscular arm and placed his hand lightly on my shoulder. "All will be well now," he said to me. He turned to Adohi and instructed him to take me back home. While I was grateful to have him lead me home, all I really wanted was to find Mother. Had she made it to the council already? Had she vanished like Adohi's brother?

Adohi ran in front, guiding our way. He knew the forest well and it was hard to keep up. As we sprinted, I pictured the coyotes at my heels. Out of instinct, I turned and saw three coyotes really were behind us. I could hear the closest coyote



panting behind me. Adohi turned around at the sound of my scream. My fear soared painfully through my body. I thought I'd been bitten until I heard Adohi commanding me to escape while he fought them off. Suddenly a sliver of the moon emerged from the clouds, and I could see the coyotes and Adohi wrestling on the ground. Their vicious grunts echoed in my ears as I ran.

The clouds had scattered into thin, fluffy strips framing the moon; but, I didn't see any signs of movement in the stars. Perhaps it was enough for me to just believe in their protection than to experience it firsthand. I prayed that the angels would lead me to Mother. Her sight was better than mine, but nowhere near where Grandmother's would have been had she still been in her gazing days. At home it was clear what she meant by me being her eyes, I always guided her here and there; but out here, they guided me to have faith. As my feet carried me forward, I used the dim silver moonlight to see my path.

Once more, I prayed to the invisible angels and once again, I heard that familiar voice chime in my ears.

*Follow me*, the little angel whispered. This time when she glided down to me, she was alone. She guided me until we reached the edge of the yard then disappeared. I hadn't stopped running since I'd left the council with Adohi. My body was ready to collapse. I felt my heart thrashing, begging to escape my chest as I skipped every other porch step. My sporadic breathing had become its own chant.

I raced inside, accidentally slamming into my mother's stomach.

"Ayoli!" She squeezed me tighter against her. "You made it back—and by yourself."

I took her by the hand and pulled her into the den where Grandmother was so I could tell them about the angelic little people. "Ulisi," I called out, ripping around the corner of the room. "Ulisi!" I shook Grandmother's shoulder, but she didn't seem to notice. I figured she was either asleep or in one of her trances where she connects with the spirits of my father and our ancestors.

I left Grandmother alone and turned to tell Mother about the creatures. Her black hair covered the sides of her face so I didn't see the tears immediately. I heard the broken breathing and saw her trembling. I turned to Grandmother to see her reaction. She wore the same expression that she had when I came running in, calling her name. I didn't understand what caused my mother's tears and why Grandmother wasn't responding to them.

"Unitsi?"

My mother freed her hands from her face to look at me. "Yes?"

"Why are you crying? I'm okay now."

She held me for a moment. I looked at my Grandmother sitting motionless in her chair, only her face was free from the blankets. I tugged at my mother's arms until she dropped her grip around me. I walked over to Grandmother, calling her again and again.

"Ulisi?"

I shook her then climbed into her chair. I touched her leathery cheek. Cold. I poked her baggy eyelids. Mother told me to come away from Grandmother. She said that Grandmother couldn't see us anymore, that she was now a star. A little person. An angel. And we had to have faith that she would protect us, guide us. And when the nights got too dark, like they were tonight, we had to look to the moon to see her. Even if it was just a glimpse.



Tiny scratch on the motorcycle gas tank.

I am caught on that insubstantial score  
that skips the record back—

Might as well face it  
might as well face it  
might as well face

the collection sewn together  
with needles and handlebars  
and parkin sons and bloodlessorders  
and aqua nets of age that catch all  
and never lose their hold.

This scratch joins the loop,  
jarring at the start, jagged at the end  
across one thousand eight hundred twenty five and two  
plays alike in the same,  
the same, the same,  
the same;

I watch the best go down,  
the pure, the strong, the virtuous;  
slow, in a drag,

the world purges its favorites.

There's a tiny scratch in every thing.  
Every surface,  
every tank  
wears an inscrutable flaw,  
hidden to all but the eye  
fixed on the fissure  
that some giant  
used for a toehold  
to kickstart his ascent,  
listening for the right tune to ride.



## **My Mother's Blood, Recurring nightmare.**

**Kellan Sampson**

*after Natasha Trethewey*

Thin, Golden strangulation  
The strap around her neck  
His hands moved like white lightning, tightening the strap  
He broke her.  
It looked like magic, the bad kind.  
His fist bit at her until her body tinted the room red.  
Chicken pocked walls,  
Each speckle embodying her unrelenting efforts.  
The term bloody pulp can only mean Mother to me.

Covered in crimson splotches outlined in violet.  
The screams sounded like drowning.  
Each blow she took seemed to muffle my ears.  
She stood strong, my mother.  
Put up a fight.  
And  
I stood in a darken doorway with my brother, children watching  
A part of the background.

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A part of the background.  
I stood in a darken doorway with my brother, children watching  
As  
She put up a fight and  
Stood strong.  
The blows she took seemed to muffle my ears.  
The gurgle of drowning masked her screams.  
Covered in crimson splotches outlined in violet.  
The term bloody pulp means Mother to me.

Chicken pocked walls,  
Each speckle embodying her weaknesses  
His fist bit at her until her body tinted the room red.  
It looked like magic, the bad kind.  
Broken.  
His hands moved like white lightning, tightening the strap  
The strap around her neck:  
Thin, Golden strangulation.

Honey sunlight oozes through  
Delicate lace curtains.  
A kaleidoscope pattern  
Of shadow and amber glow  
Paint the walls and small freckled  
Figure of the girl in the mirror  
Above my Grandmother's old bureau.

Fingers glittering with anticipation  
I reach inside the smooth ivory  
Box lined in blue velvet. Bright jeweled  
Brooches and treasures from years  
Past stare up at me. I reach  
For a strand of familiar square  
Stones to wrap around my neck.  
Hanging there, the bone colored  
Beads drip down to my navel.  
They remind me of teeth, or a  
Fossil from some forgotten time,  
And I wonder what she wore them with.







The lightning bugs were calling us  
Shining out of the shadows  
Teasing the shouts and laughter  
From the children both young and old.

We chased them with our jars ready,  
Three holes punched in their metal lids,  
Blind to the sense of their capture.  
We knew only to catch the most.

The light from their bodies would dim  
Before the breaking of morning,  
The jars their tombs, prisons of glass,  
The lack of understanding, ours.



*We live by encouragement and die without it—slowly, sadly, angrily.—Celeste Holm*

One afternoon I went for a walk with my manager through Madison Square Park. My acting career had all but stalled out, the bar was no longer providing sustainable income, and I was depressed. We were discussing possible new directions, ideas to kick-start a momentum that had never really begun.

“Marshall, I have a friend who’s an actress. Well, something of a legend, really—and she’s had a stroke. She wants someone to come in and accompany her while she rebuilds her voice. Would you be interested?”

“Who is it?”

I couldn’t process. I was raised on her movies. During my years at musical theatre conservatory we had carefully studied her work; my professors and peers held her in extremely high regard. She counted among her many accolades an Academy Award and a Golden Globe. She originated many iconic roles in the American and British theatre. The following Monday, I would begin work as pianist for Celeste Holm.

Building a career in the performing arts requires versatility and a willingness to experiment. My friend Michele called one day to prod me to rewrite an old play of mine, *Love at the Awful Waffle*, for a one-act festival going up off Broadway. It would be a lot of work, and I would only receive 50% of the receipts (which may or may not offset expenses), but it was exposure. I agreed immediately. My marriage was unravelling, I was putting in late hours at the bar, and I was about to begin work with Celeste, but it was just too great an opportunity to pass up.

*Awful Waffle* centers around three waitresses in a Waffle World in Hogansville, Georgia. The original script was a greenhorn’s piece, based loosely on some waitresses I had once known and the Kathy Mattea song “Love at the Five and Dime.” The submission guidelines required an outline of the plot and one scene, five to ten minutes in length. I wholly scrapped the plot of the original but maintained the characters and the setting. Given the pitifully short amount of time in which I had to write and mount the play, I was forced to adapt the characters to suit the actors in my stable. My three Georgia waitresses became transplants from Staten Island. I brewed the coffee and dug in for the weekend.

The first Monday with Celeste, I arrived ten minutes early. I have always lost composure when encountering celebrity—particularly those whom I have long admired—so I had taken half a valium before I left my house. It did nothing. My hands were still clammy, my breath short. I walked around the block, shaking out my hands. Three minutes to the hour, I announced myself to the doorman and rode the elevator up to Celeste's apartment.

Celeste's husband Frank met me at the door.

"Marshall!" He offered his hand. "Come on in, Celeste is just getting up from her nap." He showed me to the kitchen, "in case Celeste needs a glass of water while you're working." The kitchen was enormous. A large table in the center and wall-to-wall glass front cabinets made quite an impression, but the focal point was the 1950s-model powder blue eight-burner range with a plaque proudly proclaiming it was custom made for Miss Celeste Holm. "Come into the living room. She'll be out shortly."

The living room was easily four times the size of my Brooklyn apartment, with ceiling-high picture windows overlooking Central Park. In the middle of the room sat her 1914 Mason Hamlin grand piano, on which she displayed her Oscar, her Golden Globe, and her Sarah Siddons Award.<sup>1</sup>

I put my bag down on the floor and sat at the piano. Frank left to help Celeste, and I played a few bars to warm up my fingers.

"Good afternoon." Many have noted how the air crackles with electricity when a true star is in the room. They understate. Her distinctive voice could cut through lead walls.

I was expecting her to be fragile, to show signs of age and stroke. After all, I was there to aid her rehabilitation. Instead she was magnificent.

"Miss Holm, it's so nice to meet you." "Won't you call me Celeste?"

She sat on the bench beside me and we began running scales. Her bottom range and her mix were breathy, but her belt and her head voice were as strong as they

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<sup>1</sup>The Sarah Siddons Award is presented annually for excellence in acting in the Chicago theatre. Its name and design come from the fictitious award presented to Eve Harrington, played by Anne Baxter, in the 1950 movie *All About Eve*. The award's name and design honor legendary Welsh stage actress Sarah Siddons. From the cast of *All About Eve*, Celeste (1968), Anne Baxter (1973), and Bette Davis (1973) received the award at varying points in their careers.



were in every recording I'd heard. When I told her as much, she pointed to the bookshelf and said, "Third book in. Grab the Weill."

We began with "My Ship" from *Lady in the Dark*, a glorious Kurt Weill/Ira Gershwin musical; Celeste starred in the 1983 West End revival. We navigated the vocal leaps cautiously, and as the song went on, we moved from merely making sounds to making music. By the end of the piece we had developed that remarkable partnership that allows true music to flow, the confidence in each other that pianist and singer are listening and working in the same direction. As she sang, "If the ship I sing doesn't also bring my own true love to me," my heart ached. This was greatness, and I was a part of it.

As the weeks flew, I learned a great deal about Celeste and her life. I learned that Frank is her fifth husband, and they caused quite a buzz when they wed on her 87th birthday, mostly because he is 46 years her junior. Her fourth husband, actor Wesley Addy, was the great love of her life. She was estranged from her children, including her eldest son, Ted Nelson, IT pioneer and originator of the term *hypertext*.

The festival accepted *Awful Waffle*. I called my closest friends together for a meeting. I was blessed to have a circle full of multi-faceted theatre professionals, all of whom would pull double duty during the frantic buildup to the show. Lisa, one of my Staten Island waitresses, designed costumes. Michele (who initially suggested we do *Awful Waffle*) and my dear friend Cheryl both played integral roles in the play and secured rehearsal spaces on the side. My husband Sean played the dumb teenager in the show and photographed all of our publicity shots. Everyone was involved in ironing out the timing of the dialogue, which attempted a Mamet-esque clip but sounded more like a rejected skit from *Hee Haw*. We rehearsed at every available opportunity. The show would open roughly two months from the day it was accepted. My time with Celeste became sacrosanct.

I spent more time at her house, often when she was asleep, sorting through piles of memories and closets of furs. Frank and I divided books, clothing, and letters into stacks of trash, donations, and sellables. I learned a lot about their marriage during these times. They had instant chemistry when they met, and their marriage had been terribly romantic until her stroke. During the first six months of her convalescence, he wasn't sure she would recover. He had prepared to battle with her children, and to sell as many of her possessions as possible to pay for her to stay at home until the end. His relief at her progress was palpable.

One delightful afternoon, Celeste and I took an extended break from the piano. "There's something I'd like to show you," Celeste said as she motioned me over to the couch. "Grab that big red book. Go on," pointing with her cane. I picked up a massive leather bound scrapbook. "My professional acting debut was *Hamlet* with Leslie Howard. We remained friends ever since, and when he died, he left me this." I opened the cover. It was every newspaper clipping, Playbill, magazine article, review, and movie advertisement from his illustrious career. Personal notes from Vivien Leigh, exchanged during the filming of *Gone With The Wind*, thank you notes from Edward and Wallis Simpson—

"Oh, they were marvelous. Very gracious. We all expected there to be something scandalous about them, but they were just lovely people."

We had a few days where exhaustion kept her from singing. The first time, I made a pot of tea and Celeste taught me how to knit. While I was learning to knit one, purl two, Celeste told stories.

"Loretta Young and I were shooting *Come to the Stable* at 20th Century Fox, and [Ethel] Merman was shooting a variety show on the stage next door. Loretta was a devout woman, and she had set up a swear jar, you know, drop a nickel in every time you swear. She hated foul language. Well, Merman comes over during a break and says to me, 'Celeste, what's this shit about a swear jar?' She swore like a sailor. And I told her, 'You know, Loretta hates swearing, so we drop a nickel in every time we swear.' So Merman pulls a twenty out of her brassiere, stuffs it into the swear jar, and says, 'Here you go, Loretta. Now go fuck yourself.'"

A fantastic theatrical tradition (that has fallen away with most) is the vacation replacement. In the days of musical theatre as high art, when theatre stars were as revered as those in Hollywood, producers would ensure audience satisfaction by bringing in big names to replace vacationing leads. Celeste guested in two major roles: for Angela Lansbury in *Mame* and for Gertrude Lawrence in *The King and I*. I had recently finished a summer stock run of *The King and I* and was ecstatic to work on a score with which I was intimately familiar.

As I played the opening recitative to "Getting to Know You," Celeste stood from the piano bench and dropped her cane. One hand on the piano for stability, she began:

It's a very ancient saying, but a true and honest thought,  
that if you become a teacher, by your pupils you'll be taught.  
As a teacher I've been learning—you'll forgive me if I boast—  
And I've now become an expert on the subject I like most:  
Getting to know you.<sup>2</sup>

And she sang. The fifty years since she played the role disappeared. And again, I flushed with pride as we pushed and pulled, reading each other's cues and creating a spectacular and entirely unique musical experience. I was living history.

On a tired Wednesday I asked her about Sinatra.

"He was always a perfect gentleman with me. But I made a point that I was not into the funny business. Richard Rodgers tried once with me during *Oklahoma!* rehearsals, and I told him that if that's what the job required, then thank you, but no thank you. And I guess everybody got the message." Celeste worked with Frank Sinatra in *The Tender Trap* and *High Society*, the latter a point of pride for her.

"[Cole] Porter kept saying, 'Celeste, I'm going to write a song for you.' For years, every time I would see him, he'd say that. And finally, he did." The song, "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire," was a classic back-and-forth duet between Celeste and Sinatra in *High Society*.

While we were on the subject, what was Grace Kelly like?

"Beautiful. Cold."

The first time we worked through "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire," I did my best Sinatra croon.

"Stop that. Never imitate. Only be yourself." Point well made.

The lesson resonated into my writing. *Awful Waffle* dialogue that read childish and cartoony developed into more truthful and honest exposition. Through the rehearsal process, my actors discovered layers in the relationships between the characters. I spent an afternoon chipping away at a particularly difficult scene between the lead waitress, Annie Sue (now Anna Maria Succardi), and her rather dim nephew, Scooter. The scene involved Annie Sue tutoring Scooter for his G.E.D., bouncing

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<sup>2</sup> "Getting to Know You" from *The King and I*, music by Richard Rodgers, lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II.



grammar puns back and forth against each other. After an hour of speed-throughs and picking through the timing, the actors started fraying around the edges.

"This isn't working. Who wants to sit through a stupid grammar lesson? The jokes are stale already," Sean complained.

"He's right. There's a connection missing here," added Vicky.

I quashed the defensive reply in my throat, that the actors should provide the connection. They were right. I was imitating superficial dialogue. I was trying to rewrite *Greater Tuna* as Sam Shepard.

"Ok, let's break for an hour. Go get some lunch and let me try to figure something out."

They left the round table and I pulled out my pencil. What was missing... well, what was missing was the truth. I took scissors to the script and literally cut out my favorite jokes, then drew an arc on a sheet of paper. I wrote "By George, I think he's got it!"<sup>3</sup> at the end of the arc, and penciled a frowny face at the beginning. And then I struggled to recall my own education, moments where a particularly good teacher ignited sparks of recognition in my head. By the time Vicky and Sean returned, I had a scene for them that was not as polished, but the characters started one place and ended another, with a deeper understanding of each other blooming through the scene.

One afternoon on the couch, Celeste and I discussed acting techniques.<sup>4</sup> My training had involved a lot of sense memory, recalling emotions from my own life to inform and infuse truth into the character.

"Never, never. That's dishonest acting. It's lazy, and it's bad for you. Create the character. Let the character live, and let the character go through his own life. If you put yourself into it, then the character isn't real."

A day came when she was too tired to keep company. I asked her if she would prefer I come another day.

"No, please, stay. Play for me. I'd like to just listen."

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<sup>3</sup> Paraphrased from *My Fair Lady*.

<sup>4</sup> A wise acting teacher once told me, "Acting techniques are like assholes. It's most important to have one that works." Every acting student studies several types of acting, with myriad techniques. Actors have to filter all of the b.s. to get to their own techniques, and that takes a lot of trial and error. It's painful and embarrassing.



She lay back on the couch and closed her eyes. I sat and played the gentlest ballads I could think of—a few originals, then I launched into a Kander and Ebb medley from their revue *And the World Goes Round*. As I finished, she nearly jumped from the couch.

“What was that last one?”

“It’s from *Flora, the Red Menace*. Liza Minnelli’s first showstopper.”

“Play it again.” I did. The song is beautiful, a romantic’s realization of true success:

When it all comes true, just the way you’d planned, it’s  
funny, but the bells don’t ring.  
It’s a quiet thing.<sup>5</sup>

“One more time.” I played the intro, and she stood at the piano. She barely looked at the music as it came out of her. I had worked with many consummate professionals, but I have never before or since seen such. It flowed directly from her heart. We ended the song with her husband Frank standing in the archway in tears.

Opening day arrived for *Awful Waffle*. High from my work with Celeste, and proud beyond belief of my company (and myself) for our efficiency and professionalism, I woke up early and made a small breakfast for Sean and me. We had to pick up a moving truck to transport the sets from Staten Island to the Upper West Side, then I would return to the apartment and meditate before heading to the theatre. Peaceful meditation would not be in the cards that day. Sean took the truck to the Verrazano Bridge, only to discover that I had his toll money in my pocket. I made it home to discover that he had my keys. The costumes, props, and wigs were in my apartment. We panicked on the phone.

“What am I supposed to do? I tried blowing my horn at the EZ pass lane, but they don’t allow commercial trucks to do that, so they sent me back,” Sean whined. I called our bank and transferred every penny I had into his account, and an hour and a half behind schedule, he was able to withdraw toll money from the ATM. I waited outside our apartment for one of our actresses to get off of work and meet me with the spare keys to my apartment, dashed inside, and grabbed the four suitcases full of the show. Overloaded and sweating rivers, I hobbled to the subway. I fought to get the enormous suitcases through the turnstile and barely caught

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<sup>5</sup> “A Quiet Thing” from *Flora, the Red Menace*, music by John Kander, lyrics by Fred Ebb.

the uptown R train. I spread out over a three-seat bench and caught my breath. Then I noticed the smell. The subway car was packed at either end, but the center where I was seated was practically deserted. A homeless man lay across from me, and he had clearly soiled his pants. I guess it was lucky that he got off at the next stop, but the smell remained. As people boarded the train and caught a whiff of his lingering aroma, they instantly connected it with me, dressed in my ratty Waffle World uniform and carrying four overstuffed suitcases. I must say, however, I really didn't care. They gave me wide berth and I was on my way to the show.

The opening was a smash. We had a full house who laughed and applauded at every appropriate spot. My actors delivered on every line, sparking a new life into these characters that I had grown to love. The ovation elated me. And at our after-show dinner, over cocktails, my manager insisted that I give *Awful Waffle* a proper television treatment and outline ten episodes. The magic of the theatre swept through me, and my world exploded with hope.

My auditions continued on the side, until at last I signed on for a lead role in yet another B-grade horror movie. Between the movie and the development of the *Awful Waffle* TV series, the west coast was calling me, loudly. With heavy heart I told Frank and Celeste that I would be moving to Los Angeles in a few months.

"Marshall, I'm so proud of you," Celeste began. "Give 'em hell." Frank insisted we all go out to dinner to celebrate. We went for Hunan on the Upper West Side, had a few bottles of wine with dinner, and we toasted my success.

My last day with Celeste came too quickly. She was tired, but we made it through most of the song book we had rehearsed. Near the end of the hour, Frank came in.

"Honey, why don't you sing 'Cain't Say No?'"

We had not touched *Oklahoma!* at all. Celeste was the *original* Ado Annie in the *original* production of *Oklahoma!*<sup>6</sup> and I was a musical theatre devotee. My throat closed, and I began to oomph-chacka the opening bars. She began to sing and my hands turned to ham hocks. I barely made it through. By the end I was shaking.

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<sup>6</sup>*Oklahoma!* is commonly regarded as the first book musical, in which every musical number is instrumental in furthering the story. It is perhaps the largest milestone in the development of musical theatre, excepting *The Black Crook* (1866), where a confluence of events merged a ballet, popular music, and a play into one disjointed performance.

"Marshall, what the hell?" Frank asked.

Celeste put her hand on my shoulder. "It's okay, I get it."

I stayed for dinner. Frank and I watched highlights from Celeste's stack of Oscar screeners<sup>7</sup> while Celeste took a bath. When she was done, she called Frank upstairs.

I sat alone in her massive living room and took it in one more time. The view was extraordinary. The Oscar so very heavy, tarnished around the edges of the engraving: *Best Supporting Actress 1946, Celeste Holm, Gentleman's Agreement*. The piano, on which Josef Myrow composed "You Make Me Feel So Young." Leslie Howard's scrapbook. Hirschfeld caricatures of her. Framed *Vanity Fair* covers, drawn by her mother.

Frank called me from the top of the stairs. "Celeste wants to say good night."

"Oh, okay. Goodnight!" I called.

"No, no. Come up here!"

I had been in Celeste's bedroom once a few months earlier, while they were renovating. I hadn't seen it since it was finished. Royal blue walls with white satin curtains, white Georgian bedroom suite, and an incongruous white leather bed emerging from the northeast corner. Celeste lay on top of the duvet in a tremendous white nightgown.

"Alright, dear. Sorry I tired out on you. Come give us a hug." I sat down beside her and kissed her on the cheek.

"Love you, Celeste."

"I love you too, dear. Be good. Be the best."

A few months ago, I wrapped a sports TV shoot that left me in Los Angeles. I slept for a day, then cabbied it to Hollywood and Highland to rent a car. That section of Hollywood Boulevard has always depressed me, with its pitiful whores and sore-thumb tourists. This day was different—I stepped out of my cab, directly onto Celeste's star on the Walk of Fame.<sup>8</sup> For that moment, the world was glorious, and it was mine.

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<sup>7</sup>As an Oscar winner, Celeste is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Every year she receives DVDs of all the nominees so that she can vote for the best. The screeners have an annoying notation at the bottom of the screen that they are "FOR ACADEMY MEMBERS ONLY."

<sup>8</sup>Celeste's star for Television. She has another star for Motion Picture; it's on Vine.

Sometimes when I'm drunk I feel  
like I almost understand,  
but that's when I'm drunk.

But still, I almost think I feel what  
(I guess) you call compassion,  
like life is worth it,

like what life means to other people  
who don't see bad in the baby  
and curse the womb.

Others and I often intersect,  
but I hasten to deadbolts  
and shun the cross.

And I rebuke god for making this  
terrible thing he called "good,"  
but remember I'm drunk.

By which I mean no apology,  
though I might beg one since I seek  
to spare confusion,

for god is a trifle  
unworthy of consideration

as I was once told  
by an intelligent man:

"You are drunk.

Forget your thoughts and sleep."

Forget my thoughts—of course he should wish  
me to wash my hands of it,  
but no,

I've made up my mind.

But still, like I almost understand,  
I feel like life is worth living.



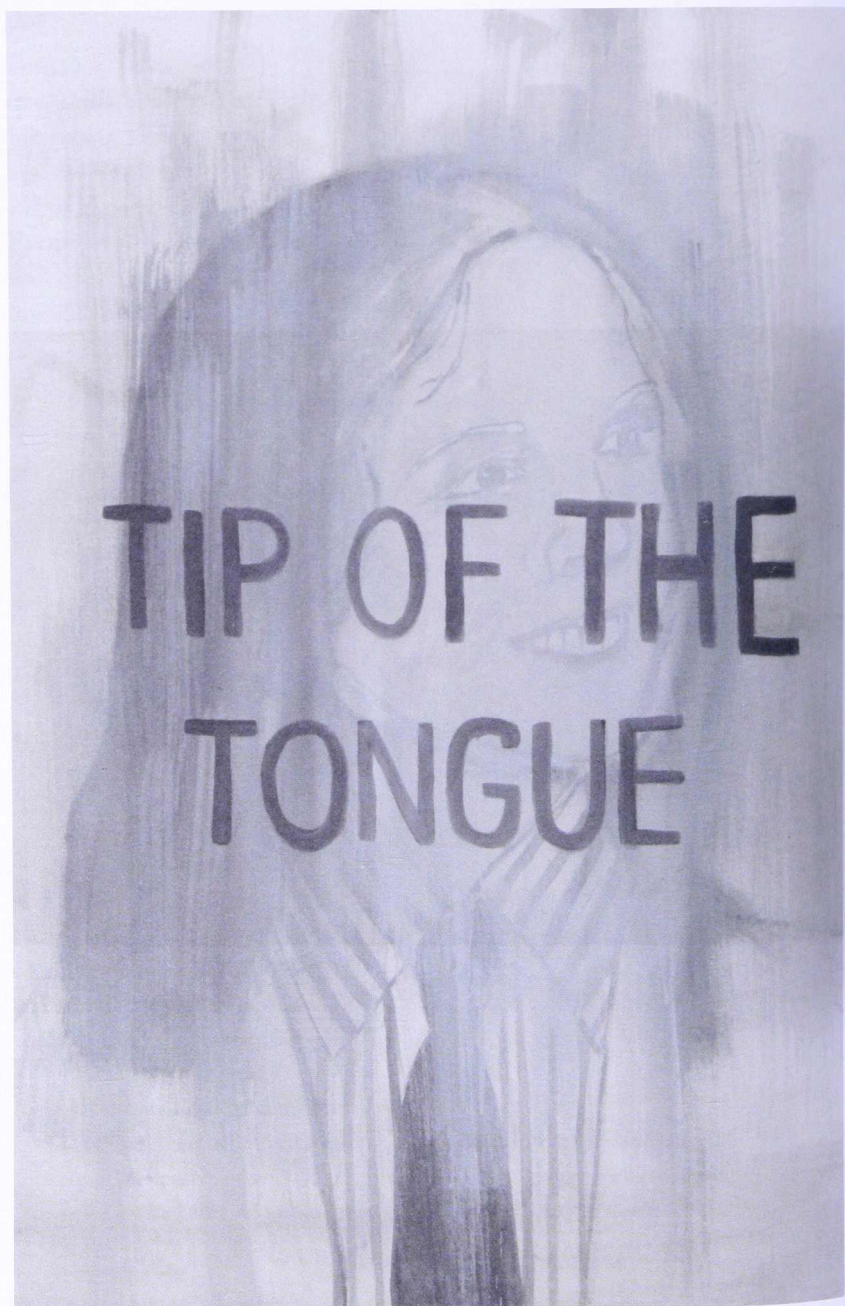


He had all white seats  
like freshly spilled milk.  
His rubber tires  
out-the-box fresh,  
ridges like rifts in Africa.  
Paint—North Carolina blue,  
no,  
Smurf blue,  
no,  
remember those freezer pops  
that came in assorted colors  
attached by the sides,  
and after each bite  
you could push the long piece up  
and take another bite?  
It was that blue.  
Long as a houseboat,  
wide as a waterfall,  
his Cadillac always had the two headrest TVs playing  
Georgia sun up and the top down.

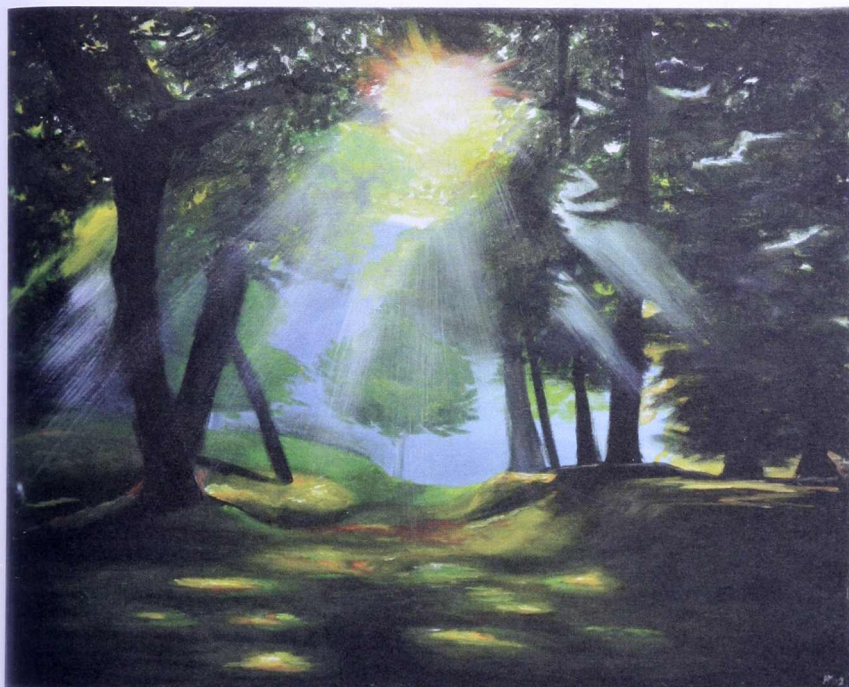
He sported a low haircut, waves defined  
with uniform precision.  
Dimples poked by God Himself.  
A Spartacus jaw and natural nose  
complemented his blank paper white teeth.  
Skin the color of barbeque grills,  
so he rode around in that car  
looking like “1” on shooting dice.

Well he was in that car the other day  
and somebody shot him with a long, black double-barrel shotgun.  
Homicide detectives said,  
“his head looked like an apple after the first bite.”











The wind ripples through the crisp, colored leaves  
As the cold ashen light precedes the dawn.  
The thrashers sing from the wooden eaves,  
The fallen foliage blankets the dew damp lawn.

It's been a year since we tried again  
To regain control of the scattered piles,  
But we tired of fighting the brutal wind,  
Surrendered our rakes with a mirthless smile.

Whether blown away on Autumn's draft  
Or washed away on the bubbling stream,  
The illusion is gone with running sap  
Just like the pleasantest of our dreams.

But winter has come and has work to do,  
And when spring comes, I can begin anew.

I stumbled under the weight of the railroad spikes, held at arms' length so as to not dirty my shirt with rust. I don't know why it mattered; my pants were already various shades of red and orange and brown, and dirt had wedged deep under my fingernails. My friend Jimmy walked beside me, his brown-blond hair made dirtier when he ran his hands through it and wiped the sweat from his brow. The two of us stepped from cross-tie to cross-tie, just next to the mile marker 3 sign and up the hill from the Brown's dog pen. The dogs barked, but couldn't see us through the trees.

The copse of trees in front of the one neighborhood shop, Crackerland Country Store, held an ever growing pile of scrap metal from the three miles of railroad tracks we considered our territory. It was hidden within the brambles so no one could see it. We thought we had to protect it from rival gangs, though we were the only children who roamed the tracks in that small Georgia town.

From where we stood, the railroad tracks stretched in a near-perfect straight line onward to the horizon in front of us, passing the community church with its two basketball goals, one for the younger children, one for the older children. Behind us, the tracks disappeared around a bend near the cranky old man's house. Rumors said he had been involved in the Philadelphia Project, and after he yelled at us to get off the tracks, we judged it to be true.

I reached the small group of trees before Jimmy and dropped the new loot into the pile, rubbing aching arms. A breeze started up and I shivered; the late autumn sunlight didn't give much heat. The sun stained the sky an odd shade of pink and purple, and I knew that if I could see over the rise of the roadway, the sun would blaze right above my white-washed home. The breeze grew into a wind, and rustled loose several leaves from the single tree that grew between the general store and the town's post-office.

Jimmy dropped his load beside mine, and we started the short walk down the street to my home, dipping into the post office long enough to glance at the wanted posters and the reward money. "We should become bounty hunters," Jimmy said. "You keep an eye out at your school, and I'll watch at mine. Tell me if anyone shows up." I nodded. "But what do we do when a wanted person shows up?"

Jimmy paused, as if he hadn't considered it, and gazed out the open door of the post-office towards the sunset, and towards the field at the end of the street. The sun had just dropped behind Mrs. Claudia's house where the Christmas star hung lifeless from her driveway gate, waiting to be used in two months. The star blocked



the sun and cast long shadows that reached up the street past my house. "You call me, and I'll call you. We'll figure it out."





*No poet without vanity—Henry Mackenzie*

From beneath my sliver of the celestial dome,  
or, so I might be gracious let me say, my portion.

From my portion I beheld the evening sun  
through a peephole allowed by a dark, massive cloud.  
The shaded star, whose brilliance permits  
no meeting without intercession,  
pierced slowly through the widening slit,  
and pricked the eye but without rebuke;

so ignoring other commoner things,  
little white wisps, gills, fluff, thatches, pillars,  
I long gazed  
at the inkblot in  
the sky.

My mind, at first, could find no form  
fit for analogy. It was a cloud:  
beauty within and beyond,  
and that, for then, was enough.

Until, tired of its stately repose,  
it shifted, spreading the slit; bright gold  
shone through a new-formed feline mane,  
struck ferocious as any thunder roar.

I was now near blinded  
and so looked down.

A moment passed:  
looking up I saw  
it had become a dog  
with a foot in its mouth.

## In Carson McCullers' Childhood Home For Evan James

lito

The idea of the satirist  
in the novelist's home.  
The basement, no less,  
in a morning of undress.

Perhaps he is testing out  
the typewriter or pencil  
on the page and the idea of him repeating  
this again and then each morning

makes an image bigger than the satirist,  
bigger than the basement, or  
childhood,  
a relationship of difference, the idea:

his warm mug of coffee,  
or tea, or chocolate, or Ovaltine—  
the beverage does not matter.  
But the idea of that piece of comfort

to hold against his cool body,  
the world outside,  
the remembrance of pain.  
The habit is like blowing

softly on the morning cup  
to cool what once was too  
hot for his dependent mind  
to ease, a cooling that is easier

than the world outside the novelist's basement.  
A cooling that moves like the early dark  
of a satirist's morning  
when no one wants to laugh.

His pores wept whiskey as he stumbled past the BMW  
and deflated the blowup snowman with a freshly lit cigarette.  
Away the creature melted into the grass as he turned  
and savagely searched for another victim.  
The next lavishly decorated house had a deer.  
A deer, fully garnished in light, mechanically moved  
its head as if saying, "No, not me!"  
The flood lights from the house began to suspect  
as he approached the deer and ruthlessly ripped  
the wire frame limb from limb.  
But there, there in the center of the next  
postage stamp plot of land stood the homemade  
nativity scene with cardboard box walls, mini shepherds with  
hockey sticks crooks carrying tuna fish can myrrh and a  
Cabbage Patch doll baby Jesus.  
He fell to his knees and began to pray.

I was forbidden to go further than Yonge & Eglinton since being caught shoplifting. I can picture how funny it must have looked on the security cam: a pudgy 13 year-old girl walks into Becker's, says hi to the clerk, Mr. Lu (who happens to be an old family friend). She stuffs 3 Fiz strips, a Skor bar, and a Big Chew down her ill-fitting overalls and says bye on the way out. But it never went so far as security tape. Mr. Lu stopped me at the door and threatened to call the cops, but called my parents instead.

My parents were already pretty strict, they still are, but they never lightened up after that. They feel distinguished by the fact that they're still married, even after all these years. They think my girlfriend turned me into a lesbian. They blame her for hackneying my cello career and turning me into an illustrator. What a joke. I tell them it was Bedford Abbey, the all-girl Catholic school they forced me into—so many nuns, so little time.

Those three kilometers south of my parents' house were a compromise. Dad wanted to shut me in, but mom convinced him that I needed exercise. I was a little chubby back then, enough that high school girls called me a porker. I wore my thick walnut hair parted in the middle like a metalhead, had a round Dutch nose that matched the clogs I insisted were cool, and my large hazelnut Italian eyes scared all the boys away. One Halloween I made a very convincing show of Adam Sandler's Opera Man. But usually I wore flannel and Converse like a stereo-dyke. How did none of us notice? Now that I tell it, years later, I got caught 'cause I wanted to: shoplifting, I mean.

But those 3 kilometers between my parents' house and Yonge & Eglinton didn't feel like a wall at first. There was lots to do—it's like downtown down there. Though, back then it was nowhere near the big commercial hub it is now. There was a movie theater and restaurants, some shops, cafés, and a really great record store. That 3 kilometer radius was enough for me for that entire summer between grade nine and ten. And then I met Coy.

#

Coy was tall, but not too tall. Not taller than me. His hair was brown, dark brown, but not so dark as to be confused with black. I think he was a year older but still between grade nine and ten like me. He wasn't athletic or skinny or fat, he was just what people call average, you know, that body type we all just seem to agree about but no one can describe.

Look, I'm gonna make this simple: I had a big crush. People say that's weird



'cause I'm a lesbian, but back then I had a crush on every boy. Yes, boys: no one's perfect.

I asked Coy out, he said no. But we became friends after he kept me on the phone for an hour, a post-letdown chat. This was just before I got caught shoplifting.

In grade nine I was in orchestra, art club, philosophy club, field hockey, Reach for the Top, took private cello lessons, and all honors classes. But I still found time to plot. I managed to hang out with Coy a couple of times during the year. We didn't seem to have much to talk about. But being grounded that summer was like a real vacation, an excuse to not do anything, a chance to think about stuff. Bit by bit I convinced mom to let me do errands: go get milk, groceries, newspapers. Eventually I got to visit friends. And then the Yonge & Eglinton pronouncement. I was on the honor system, and (except for the shoplifting incident) wouldn't dare defy my parents. Until that August with Coy.

#

Coy lived with his dad just a few blocks from me, and his backyard was perfect for wasting the summer days. I was there almost every day that August.

We started out that day doing what we normally would, listening to good music. Assertive songs. Songs that would make you want to knock someone down. I guess you'd say evocative but really they were just silly. Dead Milkmen. Violent Femmes. Nirvana. Dinosaur Jr. None of this electro-detached bullshit you hear now. Today, indies are all about ethereal but really it's 'cause they're scared of a melody, of directly playing the thing. It's like it's cool to be disconnected. I can't think of anything less cool.

We burned out the first Femmes tape by noon and got bored pretty quick with the others. Only so many times you can laugh at "Takin' Retards to the Zoo."

And then, he said it.

—Tessa... Let's go.

—Where?

—Anywhere. Let's see what's for sale at Vortex.

Our secondhand record store was the main source for two-dollar tapes. And where was Vortex? Yonge & Eglinton, of course.

—How are we gonna get there, Coy?

—I got twenty bucks. You?

—My mom gave me forty, but don't get ideas. It's for the whole week.

We decided to walk the three kilometers. And along the way, Coy wasn't too

chatty. But every once in a while he'd say something weird. About a half hour into the walk we stopped by the entrance to Muir Gardens, all the roses in full popped bloom, the sun beaming down on everything in its afternoon boom. He looked at one of the big pink ones.

—We're not real, you know. Just British imperialist inventions.

—Not me, Coy. I'm Dutch.

—What I mean is, it's not like what you think.

—We really need to pick up the pace, Coy. I wanna try to get Vortex before it closes in four hours.

—You know that tiger still burns bright in my mind. It's fucking great art.

He liked my pencil crayon illustration of a tiger. I had shown it to him that morning and Coy loved it. He kept bringing it up, saying it was representative of my work.

—It really is a brilliant illustration.

But there aren't any famous pencil crayon artists around, are there? I still miss those fresh packages of Laurentiens. So sweet. Smelled like sawdust and pigment and seared plastic. But now it's all lithography.

The first time I saw Coy it was pretty magical. My debut cello performance with the Mooredale Orchestra, a very big deal for wannabe orchestra stars. It was this old church in Rosedale somewhere, the posh part of the city where all the upper middle class climbers hang. We were sold out, as usual, mostly parents and teachers in the audience and all of them paying close attention to their child's every move. We had just gotten to the third movement in Bach's 3<sup>rd</sup> suite, you know, Air. And he walked in.

I wasn't looking at my partner's sheet-music, I knew my part by heart. I was lost in the sound, focused on my playing, looking up to the back door to avoid those intense lights. I was lulled. It's a rare event. But Coy walked in and the music made sense. I was so caught up in the perfection of the sound and his body, I held my breath. Actually, the only thing I could hear was my breath stopping, and that's when I realized I'd slipped on a double-stop. I'd get shit for that later from dad and my cello teacher, but I didn't care. My fucking Juliet had just walked in to Bach. Coming out into that church, he looked toasty like a fresh-baked pie. I felt—of all things—pride, proud that someone that intriguing had come to see me. I wasn't nervous after that, but my imagination took me away. He hadn't, of course, come to see me.



Coy wasn't exactly a tough. In fact, I heard recently that he might be gay. Not that gays can't be toughs, but, you know. Sometimes I think I had Tourette's back then. I just thought it was my duty to say whatever was on my mind. And I think Coy was my biggest sponsor. Coy, who said strange, sometimes terrible things. Coy, the surprise. Coy the one who taught me about roofs.

#

I should explain before I get to the roofs. I'm telling you this because I haven't told anyone about how close we were, why it hurt that he stopped talking to me. You'll forgive me that this goes everywhere. Think of it as a sketch. To do this I gotta free myself of logic, of the ordered enumeration of sentences. Everyone says to write by hand, but I can't do that, my brain won't let me. I'll spend too much time working on a sentence or a paragraph or the logic of things that I won't get out what I really want to say. I can do it with art, I can let things smear onto the paper or canvas slowly and let them brew the illusions. But when it's a story then I can't take it slow. I have to be honest. I can't make things up. If I think about it too much, I'll give in and make stuff up.

#

It was a sunny day but the heat was chilled by a perfect lake effect breeze. We walked to Vortex in about an hour and spent maybe thirty minutes there. It was like visiting a friend's place. We had gone so much, we knew every inch. Up a narrow, stuffy, wooden staircase to the second floor, the smell of old stereo equipment, the crinkling of shrink-wrap, Talking Heads playing just quieter than too loud. Red shelves filled with vinyl and cassette tapes, just one shelf with brand new, state-of-the-art compact discs that no one would look at. There was always a handful of middle aged guys in there no matter what day or time, there probably still is. I skimmed the usual shelves, eyed up the Zeppelin box-set, dreaming that one day I'd have every album on hi-fi cassette—that I'd draw my masterpieces while listening to every perfect track. But all I could find was a tape of The Cure remixes. I got it for a toonie and then noticed that Coy had slipped out.

#

When I came down he had a cab waiting. I didn't follow, couldn't understand what he meant by it. He scooped up at the air, exaggerating, telling me to get in. I did, confused.

—Where are we going?

—Shh. Driver, we'll just go down to Bloor.



The driver was an older man. Greek, I think. Didn't say much. He had a picture of his two toothless kids when they were younger (I could tell by the worn out photos). Or maybe grandkids. But before I could notice his name, I noticed that we were pointed south.

—Coy, what are you thinking? I can't cross Eglinton.

I could see the traffic lights zooming up into the windshield. At any moment I would cross the forbidden intersection, defying my mother's already stretched rules. I panicked.

Coy grabbed my hand. I couldn't believe it—he actually touched me. We had been seeing each other for weeks by that point and he had never touched me, not even a hug. In one perfect moment I was transported, and not just in a cab, but actually moved. It was better than that first time at Mooredale. I barely listened as he whispered something to me. But I was tuned out, lost in the radio, blissed by the busy city view rolling by, palms glowing.

There were lots of people out on the streets. It was a busy Saturday afternoon. Parents with their toddlers, old people doing their shopping, people moving, milling, being busy. As we passed the old Irish pubs, the dingy Burger Shack, a bagel place, Judaica shop and three gas stations, I suddenly noticed there were no kids our age around. We were the only ones. Maybe they were stuck at Eglinton, stuck without a Coy.

I watched on as intersections rolled by, watched as my world opened by three more kilometers.

Coy popped open his door just south of Bloor. He hadn't let go of my hand. He led me out of the cab.

—Run!

Before I could inhale, my feet were taking me down Yonge, back out into the smaller streets near Bloor. I had done it. In just a few short hours, I had explicitly defied my parents. And now I was committing petty fraud. They were right all along, my corruption was instant. I knew there was no turning back as the poor cab driver yelled something at us in Greek, red-faced in the sun. He didn't seem to be trying too hard, or I was running too fast. We were halfway to the lake, halfway to big trouble.

I finally caught up to him.

—Fuck, Coy. You could have told me. I left my fucking tape in the cab. And just like that, we'd become closer than ever.





We finally stopped outside a ballet studio, looking in at the empty rehearsal spaces full of mirrors. Coy laughed, then I laughed, and he pulled out two cigarettes. It wasn't my first time smoking, but the first time I cared about looking like I'd done it before.

—We have to get back to Eglinton, Coy.

—Tessa, how could you do that to your music? Your art?

—Do what?

—Compete. You put your work on a slab, like meat. They make it look pretty, but the judging makes you meat.

—It's not like that.

—No?

—It's not about the judging. I'm just competing with myself. They let me know how good I can be.

—How can anyone else know that?

—How come you're such a...

—Good friend?

—Ha. How come you're so sour?

We moved on. The conversation never really stopping. Guess this is only what I remember.

#

We walked for hours. I don't remember too much about all the details. I remember deciding that there was no point in turning back. My parents didn't expect me until ten that night and they had no way of knowing that I had already broken their law, escaped the boundary.

I remember thinking it was odd that Coy didn't talk much about his girlfriend. Well, his three-way. Not two girls, but with his girlfriend Celina and Celina's boyfriend, Rory. At the beginning of the summer Coy confided that he was in love with this girl, some *quebecoise* bombshell. But she was in love with another boy. The only way they could be together is if they were all together. Coy said he tried to stay away but couldn't. And eventually, they all did it together. Rory, the other boy, went to St. Anselm's, a very private, haughty all-boys private school in Aurora. I'd been there before. In fact, Coy introduced me to a guy there I dated. Anyway, all seemed to be working well even though their relationship was sort of secret. He'd mention going to see them in Aurora every once in a while, but I'd never met them, and that day in August, he wasn't talking too much about them. Part of me thought

he was making them up.

—How's Celina?

—Fine.

I asked him questions around Dundas, by the Eaton Center, to calm my nerves. There were millions of people around, so we decided to veer off onto the side streets. I was certain that we'd get caught, but I was having too much fun to care.

Whenever I see struggling love triangers, I still wonder why they don't just make it work, have a throuple. Maybe it just doesn't work out 'cause it's hard enough to be in a couple. But does it ever really work out?

#

Lake Ontario was shining like a white sheet with turquoise crystals on it. I couldn't tell if it was showing off for me, cheerleading my breakout, or if it was just happy to be having the Dragonboat races on it. Red, gold, blue, and silver boats darted across its waters like the rips in birch bark.

Coy bought us some ice cream cones and we got tickets to ride the ferry across the harbour to the Toronto Islands. Everything was blazing with activity, white sails set up for wind, sun-screened kids screaming with joy, seagulls cashing in. I guess they're not seagulls, but you know what I mean—it was storybook. And Coy's smile squinted into the fresh lake air as we watched the islands getting closer. We walked the boardwalks, fed some swans, found some quiet corners to talk about music and had a cigarette looking back at the cityscape. A news-crew filming the Dragonboat races caught us holding hands over the curved, white bridge, the bridge over the lilies. We waved and smiled at the camera like a happy couple.

#

I guess Coy felt inspired to talk once the sun started setting. We were waiting for the ferry back to the city. I told him that I was worried my parents would find out and forbid me to see him. The city was disappearing into the night.

—You can't keep it up forever. Art, music, solo, orchestra, painting, drawing, no way. One day you'll have to choose.

—That's ridiculous, Coy. I know plenty of people—my mom for one—who do it all.

—Sure. She does it all. Who's ever heard of her?

—It's not about fame. It's the joy. She even had kids, has a job. All of it.

—Sure, and that's what you want: all of it?

—Yes.

—I don't believe you. Those competitions, one day they'll decide who's best and it won't be you and you'll realize it's all a waste of time. You didn't make something amazing.

—Not if I get in for composition. Then I can.

—Sure, but then you will have chosen: you'll be a composition major. The world makes you do it. And then no more orchestras for Tessa.

—Whatever.

He was starting to get to me.

—Anyway, fuck you. You don't think I'm the best cellist?

—What do I know about cello. Maybe. Maybe at Bedford Abbey Catholic Institute. Or Mooredale. But Toronto? Canada? The world?

Coy made choices though. He was full of shit. He was going to be a big theatre director. That was a choice.

#

Back on land, I wanted to get home. It had already been a packed day and we had a few hours of walking to do. We stopped by an office building north of the ferries. It had some shops on its ground floor, a convenience store, a LCBO, a Tim Horton's. Coy told me to wait for him. We were hungry and it was starting to get cold out.

He had sung to me on the ferry-ride back. Some old Depeche Mode song about waiting for the night or something. He had a great voice, baritone, but with a razor's edge. Sometimes, if he hit the right tone it made my throat bubble in that way that Qtips make your ears go gasmic, in that wonderful place where you know that you're feeling something really good, really true. I wish he would only ever sing, 'cause that was when he was telling the truth. Most of the stories he told were complete fictions. Anyway, he didn't want to be a musician. He was sure about theatre.

Suddenly, he busted out from behind me telling me to run again. I couldn't believe it. What had he done this time?

—Don't stop, Tessa, run!

#

We ran, running, running. Through a park, the green fading past us. He was ahead, about twenty meters, and then into traffic. I was too elated to worry about the cars, artillery fast. He zoomed through them. I did my best to follow, always at that safe distance that those who follow tend to keep. As he darted, I darted, panicked, my heart pounding. And just when I thought it would explode in my chest, I lost him,



felt the blood splash inside. Suddenly, I stopped, catching my breath, looking all around, sweat blurred eyes. I picked him up again down an alley between two brick restaurants; I didn't look at the signs at first, just the smell of grease and warm food. I was hungry. Without thinking I moved towards him, down the alley. One of his arms came up, like he was waving me into the dark alley.

—Let's go up, Tessa. Let's watch.

—Where?

I noticed his hand wasn't waving, but pulling down on something overhead.

—Up.

He pulled the ladder down. The bars went up about nine stories above a McDonald's.

—You go first, I'll follow, just in case.

I pulled myself up the thin bars of the ladder. About one story up I stopped, uneasy.

—Just in case of what?

—Keep moving. Lower your voice.

I thought we would definitely get caught. I'd be in major shit. It was the first time that day that I really doubted our ability to go unnoticed. My heart drummed up again.

But when we got up and I saw the view, it all changed. We were about ten floors up, maybe more, and we could see everything around us, skyscrapers, the lake, the CN tower, the entire city. I felt like flying up there, more open than when we crossed Yonge & Eglinton. Standing on our two hind legs greeting the stars we could see all the way to Yonge & Eglinton, we could see beyond the trees and maybe Muir Park. We could see well downtown and beyond to the lake—the southernmost boundary of the city, the entrance to the United States. There was more up there than there had ever been.

#

Coy had swiped a mickey of peach schnapps.

—That's not funny, Coy. They have cameras at the liquor store. What the fuck. You're going to be in so much shit.

—You asked me why I was sour before.

Coy looked totally different, like when vampires change in the dark, fangs out. He was just as pale, toothless, no grin. He looked at me trying to pierce me. He drank some schnapps and handed it to me. I drank.





—What is it?

—The reason I don't see Celina anymore, something happened that last time I was up at Anselm's.

Then he told me something strange. The details are fuzzier than they probably should be, but I didn't want to remember. His body seemed to shrink, but he didn't get overly emotional. His eyes looked like they had that afternoon, looking back out over the lake, distant. The night darkened, moonless, and the city felt far off.

Coy told me that Rory's guys were in this secret high school frat. They seemed like nice guys, about to graduate, all about nineteen years old, maybe 6 of them altogether. That night they got really vodka drunk, having fun for a while until a couple of the guys were making nasty jokes about chicks. One of them told Rory's secret about him and Celina and Coy. Coy said he was watching them all get drunker and muddier, that he started to sober up the minute they joked about Celina. She was on her way over and when she got there, they took her to this park by the school and maybe each got on her. They made Rory do it, too, but Coy said no. He watched. He hadn't spoken to any of them since. Not even Celina. It had been a month.

I had no idea what to say. We were quiet for some time. Coy told me so quickly. In just a few moments the perfect day seemed like it was an episode from a boring TV show. At first I felt so sorry for Celina, then him, and then worried that he'd made it all up. It didn't seem to fit together. I hadn't met these people, but I had spent almost the entire summer with him. I think he lied about whatever happened to Celina. There's probably no Celina, no Rory. I cried.

In my eyes, Coy's weird story made him totally fucked up. Whether he made it up or not, either way, he was seriously desperate for attention or love or something. Who does that to people they love? Make up stories? It's crazy. When you love someone you tell them the truth and then they can decide whether or not to let you go. I tried to think of the questions I should ask, and his answers all seemed too perfect. I still don't know why he told me.

#

As soon as he'd finished the confession, there was this pathetic cry, and then a sound-system close-by started broadcasting to the night downtown. A party in the park. Dance music. A thick, electric, warm pad drew up the buildings, pop-corned off the glass and the moon rose, all on cue, a symphony starting. We stood up to get a better view. The moon was coming up behind the M of the McDonald's arch,

silver behind gold. Coy took my hand. He seemed relieved. He'd lied. But I still believed him, wanted him to feel believed.

And then fireworks. I'd forgotten that the Symphony of Fire was on that night. My favorite of Canada's events, a fireworks display timed to classical music. Our show wasn't timed, but the electric beats made our world tick. And I didn't think too much then, just felt a lot.

We soaked it all in for a while. The mood lightened. Coy felt more talkative again in his relief.

—You know, that night I heard you play for the first time? I didn't know you yet, but I could hear you play more than anyone. Not because you were too loud, but I looked straight at you and heard everything your cello sang. I could pick out your sound like a perfect song under the din of city traffic.

Coy could tell stories, but I could always tell when he was telling the truth.

We climbed down and bought thirty-cent cheeseburgers for the TTC ride home, jealous looks from midnight drunks, laughing, ruddy cheeks.

#

I couldn't believe it. I got home and all the lights were out. Or at least all the lights that were usually out were out. It was like they forgot me. I thought I had expertly negotiated with my parents. I was only two hours late. They wouldn't care.

I walked to my room, but got some milk before getting there and almost spit it out. My dad was sitting on my bed, looking up at me more disappointed than ever. When he talked, he spoke softly, sternly.

—You don't think I watch the news. You don't think I saw my fool of a daughter waving at the camera. I don't want to know what you were doing at the Dragonboats, but in the morning, I want you to tell me all about your plan to get back on track this year. I did not do all this for you so you could become some dropout hoodlum. Your talent isn't enough.

I couldn't help it, I laughed at hoodlum. In one motion he rose from the bed, lifting his arm to strike me but left the room instead.

#

You forget things and then you suspect that somehow the things you remember are special or more important than the things you forgot. But of course, this is illogical. You can't evaluate the meaning of things you can't remember. And now that the memories you happened to hang on to keep repeating themselves in their shallow swirl, you add more meaning to these survivors. I guess that's why survivors are



guilty. But I can't honestly tell you it's meaningful or important that I remember what Coy said on the roof that night that is burned in my mind. I know he said it after the confession. And it's stuck with me.

—I want to be amazing. I'm not like these poseurs with their pretentious myopia. But I'm not amazing yet. It hurts getting there.

There might not have been anything special about him, but I saw something that he couldn't. Or, at least, he felt that he had to make up some kind of fiction to explain why he was unhappy. I didn't, I knew why I was unhappy.

—Coy, you should probably stop shoplifting.

I know he loved me 'cause he never talked to me again after I told my mom about his strange story. I had to tell her the truth. She must have said something to his father, because whatever happened, Coy avoided me, my calls, everything.

#

When selecting a rooftop you wanna choose something high up. Preferably, you would want to pick a roof that you can return to so that you don't make mistakes and no one gets hurt. Ladders are usually behind establishments. This is good because although it's not technically illegal, it could be considered trespassing or even breaking and entering. The best tip I can give you is that you want a place that is not obstructed by things. Billboards are a great feature and offer many ways to climb up. I've seen a lot of the world by climbing roofs with billboards on them. There is more up there than there will ever be.

You asked if I ever thought about jumping, and of course I did. A thousand times I wanted to jump into the sky and stay there. But I was never thinking about falling. Not then. Not at all.

## As I Cross the 13th Street Bridge I Dream of Juliet

Vanessa Escobar

Every moment feels like five years right now.  
All the stoplights are green, the sky clear  
in its darkness. My eyes red from falling  
asleep next to three cats, knowing  
I'm allergic but they're so soft.

They should create this block on your  
phone that doesn't allow you to text  
drunken poetry to the girl who said no  
to your ring pop proposal. She doesn't  
even want to pretend to be with you.

And the wannabe Gaston from the bar  
craves your attention but you don't know  
how to tell him you don't want free drinks.  
You're a full price lady.

You're trying to find the magic in things  
but they just might not be there, and there's  
nothing romantic about hovering above a toilet  
seat writing a love poem for a girl whose eyes  
are just so fucking bright and blue that they reel you in,  
never even giving you a shot at pulling away.





Burgundy roofing, white siding, cream cross,  
creaky double doors with chipped iron handles,  
a crusting scab of hope.

Sin's delicacies are behind me, the sweet food that is female flesh,  
the snowy nights filled with the taste of ecstasy,  
the green grass with the pungent odor when the field is ablaze.

Vivacity, vitality are before me in the form of windows stained apple green,  
raspberry red, and pinecone brown, lacquered pews with hickory hues  
smoothed by the thighs of sinners seeking change.

Above me, a lustrous blaze, bright bulbs like two question marks  
connected by the open ends, attached to the brass heads of shotgun shells,  
the spirit of truth shining wherever two or three come together,  
the glow of souls whose sins are cast into sunken holes that are seas.

Beside me, an ordinary man- sand-colored straw hat, eyes below his  
brim, shirt sleeves rolled above his elbows, suspenders  
belted over his shoulders, face fixed in a smirk, his Book open to  
Revelation 20:10.



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